

*A Magazine of Class Struggle Theory and Practice*

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# THE NORTHEASTERN ANARCHIST

ISSUE #10

## FIGHT TO WIN!

*Developing  
Anarchist Strategy  
Within Social  
Movements*



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# THE NORTHEASTERN ANARCHIST

*The Northeastern Anarchist* is a magazine of class struggle theory and practice published by the Northeastern Federation of Anarchist-Communists (NEFAC). We focus on anarchist-communist theory, history, strategy, debate, and analysis in an effort to further develop our ideas and practice. Articles published here do not necessarily represent the collective viewpoint of the federation unless otherwise noted.

NEFAC is a bi-lingual (French and English) organization of revolutionaries from the northeastern region of North America who identify with the communist tradition within anarchism. The federation is organized around the principles of theoretical and tactical unity, collective responsibility and federalism. Our activities include study and theoretical development, anarchist agitation and propaganda, and participation within the class struggle.

As anarchist-communists, we struggle for a classless, stateless, and non-hierarchical society. We envision an international confederation of directly democratic, self-managed communities and workplaces; a society where all markets, exchange value, wage systems and divisions of labor have been abolished; where the means of production and distribution are socialized in order to allow for the satisfaction of needs, adhering to the communist principle: *"From each according to ability, to each according to need."*

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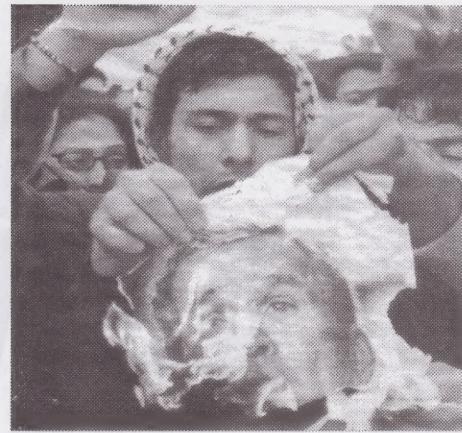
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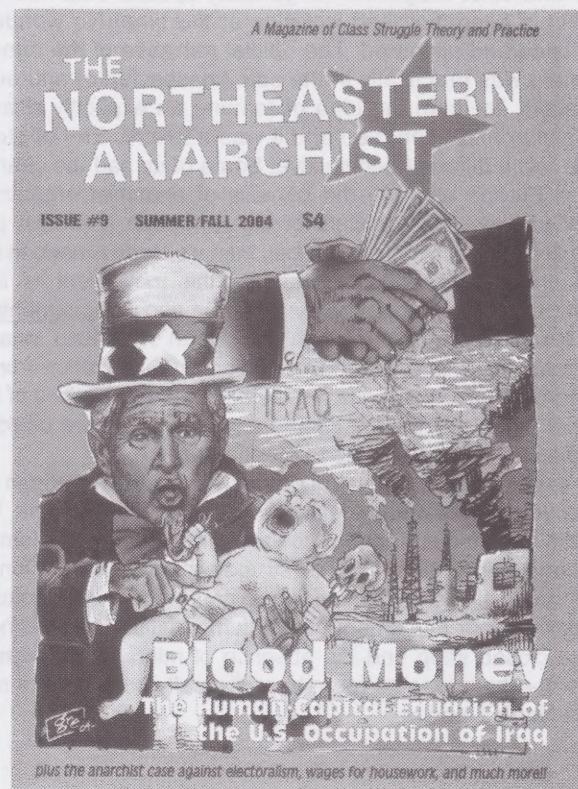
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# WE LEARN AS WE WALK



## Looking Back on the First Five Years of NEFAC

by Nicolas Phebus

The late 1990s was a depressing time for anarchists in North America. Long time activists were leaving a declining movement en masse, while projects were disbanding or taking a hiatus. Anarchists of the 1990s had struggled hard to develop a working praxis, while simultaneously trying to predict what "the next big thing" would be in terms of social struggle. Some talked of ecology, while others built up infoshops and other counter-institutions. Many focussed on radical/anarchist single-issue activism (ARA, Earth First, Food Not Bombs, Copwatch, ABC, etc.) and many more attempted to popularize anarchist ideas within various counter-cultures. However, an important minority attempted to build explicitly anarchist organizations and networks.

In 1998, the organization that everyone loved to hate (or emulate), the Love & Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, dissolved. At the same time many of the projects that largely defined themselves as being in opposition to this organization were also experiencing serious problems. It seemed that more than a decade of anarchist activism was evaporating in North America. By that time it was clear that the anarchist movement of the 1990s had largely failed. In fact, when 'the next big thing' did finally erupt in the streets of Seattle in 1999, not only did it take almost everyone by surprise, but there were very few serious anarchists left to comment on it. Seattle was a terrific boost for the anarchist movement. From a truly marginal politico-cultural scene, anarchism was immediately thrust to the forefront of this new mass movement based around the struggle against globalization. It was precisely around this time that NEFAC was formed.

### Inspiration Through Frustration

Our general frustration with the North American anarchist movement ran fairly deep. Most significantly, we felt the movement lacked solid politics and coordination. On the whole, anarchist politics were rather crude and offered little in the way of serious analysis or theoretical depth. More often than not, people were either isolated in mass, reformist organizations or grouped in marginalized radical projects. In both cases we felt anarchists were largely disconnected from the movements of oppressed peoples and lacked the leverage to affect social change. This disconnect also meant that the fate of anarchism was intimately linked with the fate of a subculture (punk rock, hippy dropout culture, etc.) to the point

where the anarchist movement was becoming a by-product of these subcultures and completely alien from working class life. While many of the founding NEFAC members did indeed come from punk or skinhead backgrounds, we felt there was more to our politics than a DIY ethic or alternative lifestyle. We felt that anarchism was first and foremost a political philosophy and that it must be open to all people, not just marginalized subcultures. We also saw anarchism as a fighting ideology that must be rooted in the everyday struggles of the working class.

Discussion of forming a new anarchist organization had started just prior to Seattle (not long after Love & Rage disbanded). At the time it was the idea of a small handful of anarchists scattered across the Northeast. The fact that the connection between two small collectives in Quebec City and Boston was made through an article on North American anarchism in a British anarchist magazine (*Organise!*) speaks volumes about our level of alienation and isolation at the time! No wonder we felt isolated and alienated. The official narrative of the anarchist movement was practically in the sole possession of anti-organizationalists. To them the idea of forming an explicitly anarchist organization had been tried and it was a failure. End of story.

We had a different perspective. Some of us had the chance to travel to Europe and see the benefits of anarchist organization. Most of us were avid readers of the European anarchist press, which seemed much more advanced than its North American counterpart. In many European countries the movement is larger, stronger, and much more deeply rooted in social movements and class struggles. Frustrated with the North American anarchist movement of the time, we took direction and inspiration from our European comrades. We studied the histories and politics of these anarchist organizations and started discussing how we could best apply these models to the North American context.

Our experiences and frustrations with the North American anarchist movement led many of us to "platformist" conclusions. While we definitely had sympathy toward anarcho-syndicalism (the other large and coherent class struggle anarchist tradition), we felt the syndicalist organizations were going nowhere. Because of the way the labor movement has become institutionalized here -- with the closed shop and the absence of minority unionism and pluralism -- there was no room to realistically build such a movement in North America.

## Enter NEFAC

NEFAC was founded during a conference held in Boston in April 2000. Our idea was to build an organization that would unite revolutionaries around a common tradition, and from here build a collective theory and practice. We wanted to take root in working class struggles and social movements in order to test our ideas and eventually kickstart a popular anarchism that would regain the past influence and strength of our movement at its height. As a first step, we set about creating the framework for the organization.

We discussed and adopted our 'Aims & Principles', our constitution, and our minimal strategic orientation. Our 'aims & principles' statement was directly inspired by a similar point-by-point political statement of the Anarchist Federation (UK). Our constitution was inspired by similar documents produced by the French libertarian movement since the 1970s. The ironic thing about our constitution is that it was modeled on an organization that had hundreds of members in dozens of groups when we, in comparison, could only count on two real groups and a dozen isolated individuals. It was more of a theoretical statement of how we believed a revolutionary organization should be organized than a practical document that reflected our real development at the time. Our strategic orientation was minimal and was summarized in this cliched statement:

*"NEFAC is an organization of revolutionary activists from different resistance movements who identify with the communist tradition in anarchism. The activity of the Federation is organized around theoretical development, anarchist propaganda, and intervention in the struggle of our class, be it autonomously or by way of direct involvement in social movements".*

During this first period, our federal 'intervention' was done in the anti-globalization movement. Despite some successes, notably in Washington and Quebec City, the limits of this type of intervention quickly appeared to us (and many other segments of the anti-capitalist movement). It is from a criticism of 'summit hopping' and the desire that our practices take root in everyday class struggles that we collectively decided to develop a new direction. In order to regain the past influence of anarchism within working class social movements we needed to leave 'activism' behind and begin to think in terms of a long-term strategy (as opposed to continually focussing on planning for the next militant bloc each time some large capitalist summit was taking place).

## Toward a Strategy

After a period of following the general (and often vague) strategic orientation we came up with for NEFAC, we decided it was time better specify what it was we meant by "intervention in the struggles of our class". Our understanding of the theoretical relationship between the anarchist organization and mass-based social movements was first expressed in our position paper 'The Question of the Revolutionary Anarchist Movement' where we wrote:

*"a radical perspective can only emerge, in our opinion, from social movements. That's why we advocate the radicalization of every struggle (from the Latin word "radix" which mean "roots" radicalizing means going the roots of problems).*

*Through this radicalization and our involvement as anarcho-communists in various movements of resistance, we want to aid the development of an autonomous class conscientiousness, the only safe-guard against political recuperation from all sides (including an eventual recuperation by an anarchist current). The revolution we want will not be the work of an organization, even an anarchist one, but of a large class movement by which ordinary people will directly take back full control on the totality of their life and environment".*

Since we were (and continue to be) a fairly small organization, we also decided to prioritize a few specific areas of struggle to concentrate our long-term involvement in. It's collectively that we decided to orient a majority of our activity on the labor, community, immigration, and anti-racist fronts. We chose these because we felt they represented important areas of class struggle where social power and a 'culture of resistance' can be developed, and because of their strategic importance from a social revolutionary perspective.

Labor was obvious for a class struggle anarchist-communist organization. We felt that the workplace is still the basic place where exploitation occurs and also the place where the radical transformation of society must begin. With the potential to disrupt (and eventually seize) the means of production, communication, and distribution, it's also the place where ordinary people still have the most social power.

Community was less obvious. But we felt that while the workplace is still central, community-based struggles have taken on a new importance, particularly since the 1960s and the emergence of mass urban upheavals. As a social relationship, capitalism is a global phenomenon, and, as the restructuring of the economy continues (with the atomization of the work process as a result), the 'community' has a potential as great as the workplace in the emergence of a new class consciousness. Anarchist-communists have a long and proud history of involvement in community struggles, and we continue that in tenant unions, anti-poverty groups, and neighborhood associations.

Lastly, given both the current attack on immigrants (post-9/11) and the history of institutionalized racism and its impact on the working class on this continent, we also chose to focus on immigration and anti-racist issues (which often overlap with labor and community issues).

Any revolutionary program should start with the needs and demands of the most oppressed, and anarchist militants should be struggling shoulder to shoulder with them. This is what we try to do, with varying degrees of success, in NEFAC. While we think there is a distinction between the specific role of political organizations and social movements, we don't think the two are totally inseparable.

To us "the anarchist organization is [...] an assembly of like-minded activists, a place of confrontation and debate, a place of synthesis of ideas, social and political experiences". We do not see ourselves as "colonizers" within social movements, but rather as fellow activists in search of the best strategies for our movements to win. This is how we approach our work as a political organization, and that's why we say we don't want leadership positions for ourselves but rather a "leadership of ideas", which essentially means that we are going to fight democratically within these movements to develop influence for anarchist ideas.



## Against The (Anarchist) Current

Although we feel our current path is in the right direction, in many ways it goes against "mainstream" anarchist orthodoxy in North America. It has often been an uphill battle to say the least. For the first few years of our existence, NEFAC's membership was growing at a steady pace. We were essentially "recruiting" from within the existing anarchist movement. Since then, despite some recent growth in Quebec and Ontario, our regional membership has stabilized. On the one hand our ability to attract new members from the existing anarchist movement has decreased greatly (we pretty much won over everyone who agrees with our politics and strategic orientation); and on the other hand, an organization that is essentially orienting itself toward labor, community groups and immigration movements is not necessarily going to be attracting young anarchist militants (sad, but true).

Since we've adopted our new "line" of intervention, we've been essentially testing strategies and tactics, and accumulating experiences. We've learned how to support (and sometimes initiate) social struggles without falling into the opportunist traps of the political left. We have made mistakes and sometimes our interventions are still disconnected and too propagandist. But, overall, we are now welcomed and our contributions are appreciated. Better still, some comrades have learned the basics of organizing unions in their workplaces or neighborhoods, and in leading "exemplary and experimental" struggles (in the sense that they go beyond the usual 'business union' or reformist methodology).

While we may have won a certain respect and legitimacy for ourselves, we have not yet succeeded in generating serious interest for anarchism among the people we have built relationships with. The link between our fighting orientations, our analysis, and our anarchism is not always clear. Given our general youth and lack of individual and collective experience, it is understandable that we have been so inward-looking up to this point. But it cannot continue, unless we want to stagnate. To move forward we need a second conscious evolution in NEFAC, similar to the one we began when we decided on specific organizational priorities.

Despite our denials, our strategic orientation continues to be largely geared toward the existing anarchist movement. A lot of our energies are spent trying to convince anarchists of the necessity of organization, and creating a legitimate anarchist-communist pole in the anarchist movement – which we have already done with considerable success (as shown by the number of new groups that now identify as "anarchist-communist" or "platformist" as compared to five years ago). Today, we are in an awkward position. Although we have made pretensions to move away from the existing anarchist movement in order to prioritize propaganda and outreach within larger working class social movements in our region, we have not fully done either. To put it bluntly: we are currently sitting on a fence.

## Where We Should Be Going: Out of Our Comfort Zone

The North American anarchist movement is incredibly small. We should be asking ourselves how much effort it's worth to form an anarchist-communist pole inside it. In the future, revolutionaries should think in terms of creating a conscious anarchist pole within social movements. This implies that we reinvent both our practice and our propagandist interventions. Right now, we are at the end of a period of accumulating experiences. Without shifting our priorities in the class struggle, we should move to an accumulation of forces.

A first step in this direction might be to reach out to all those militants who, over the years, severed ties with the so-called "anarchist movement" in favor of a deeper involvement in social movements (on an individual basis). Merging with these veterans could be a first step in the transformation of class struggle anarchism into a legitimate pole in the social movements. The number of social activists who identify with class struggle anarchism, and less importantly with our own organization, should grow in order to directly have real social influence. To do this, we must have something to offer to social movements. This "something" can be a framework of analysis, effective tactics and strategy, and methods of organization. This in turn implies a change in our propaganda apparatus. NEFAC's newspapers, which are essentially filled with socio-political news and analysis, is a step in the right direction.

Popularizing anarchism within social movements implies making anarchism accessible to everyone, hence strengthening the political presence of anarchism in our cities. Our current cannot afford to stay confined to the activist ghettos. In addition, we cannot really count on the rest of the anarchist milieu to present anarchism in an adequate manner to the population in general.

Our deeper involvement within social movements means that our priorities have been shifting and that we are not as publicly visible as before. There is generic propaganda work that is not done a lot in NEFAC. This should change as we gain experience (and hopefully grow). After all, how do we want people who are developing a radical consciousness to embrace anarchism if we are not presenting anarchist politics in the public sphere? Popularizing a fighting line without strategic perspective and an explicit anarchist social project is not enough. Sooner or later, people will ask themselves political and strategic questions; if we are not able to give a minimum of answers, they'll go elsewhere (i.e. Leninists or reformists with more accessible political programs).

Montreal NEFAC participates in 'Red and Black Bloc', Mayday 2004



Another path of development that we've recently started to take should be deepened. To consolidate anarchism in our class, revolutionaries need to go where anarchism never went: in the small cities and towns of our region. A new propagandist orientation could be useful where the anarchist movement is weak or non-existent since it could help make it known. In our infancy, joining NEFAC demanded a lot of time and energy since everything was yet to be built. Today, we are probably at a stage where we could support and help the creation of new collectives, most notably by furnishing affordable propaganda, speakers, and financial resources. But to do this, we need to make the first steps.

The 'normal' relationship between anarchists in the big cities and smaller towns has usually been a one way street: they come to the big cities for the bookfairs, the demos, to visit the local infoshop, to come to speaking events, gatherings, etc; but anarchists from the big cities rarely ever visit the smaller towns, not even when there is a well-publicized event. This needs to change and the relationship needs to become a two way street. NEFAC groups throughout the region (most notably in Quebec) are starting to change this. We try to visit our comrades as often as possible, and try to organize tours that stop in their

cities and towns. This way, we hope to build a more equal relationship.

We've already started to gain new members outside of the huge urban centers of our region. Whether it's in Peterborough, Montpelier, York, or, more recently, Saint-Georges and Sherbrooke, NEFAC is starting to develop roots outside of the "big cities". However, it is still a fragile relationship and when we fail on following through with contacts and organizing activities with them, groups often fall apart and people quietly leave. We need to seriously increase our support for these comrades.

Unfortunately, outside of joint participation in large mobilizations and our press, one of the great weaknesses of NEFAC is its incapacity to generate common projects and campaigns. Experience shows that sub-regional structures, where comrades are able to meet more often and build campaigns and projects around local issues, are a great way to put life into the organization and build confidence and strength. Comrades in Quebec and the Mid-Atlantic already have a NEFAC Regional Unions that meet regularly and we hope that somewhere down the road, we will be able to build similar structures in Ontario and New England. We feel this would be the ideal structure to enable people from outside of our big cities to get involved in NEFAC specifically, and the anarchist movement in the general.

### **The Shocking Truth About NEFAC: We Are (in many ways) Just a Network**

There's an ambiguity with NEFAC at the organizational level. Most of our founding members had no real prior experience with political organizations, and because of this we tended to approach organizing rather mechanically in the beginning. Our understanding of organizing was more theoretical than practical. Despite our "platformist" pretensions, in many ways we are much more a network than a federation, or even an organization like Love & Rage was with 'locals' and so on. Our grassroots nodes (i.e. collectives) are truly autonomous and are in constant contact with all other nodes without having to go through a central filter. Our birth at the age of the internet is largely responsible for that. However, we must recognize that we have succeeded in creating an organization that is both very decentralized, and at the same time very united.

This has sometimes led to some ambiguities. For example, we have been unable to create central positions that are elected and controlled by the whole membership. There's no elected central structure in NEFAC; every task, even political tasks like producing the publications, are given with a vague mandate to various collectives. Up to this point there have been no serious difficulties with delegating responsibilities in this manner. But, it can lead to two types of problems. First, it is almost impossible for the federation to identify problems before a large crisis erupts; and second, people with mandates have a tendency to see the projects they are responsible for as their "babies" while the rest of the organization experiences alienation. One of our future challenges will be to increase transparency and the participation of everyone, while preserving the efficiency of the organization.

We must also recognize that NEFAC functions well only when people function well. We periodically have problems of collective responsibility at all levels. Since there's no one in charge of coordinating the whole federation, we still have problems following mandates (even if we're becoming increasingly better than when we first formed). Also, we collectively seem to have an aversion to budgeting. Of course we have a treasury and we are all supposed to pay regular dues, but the

general functioning of the organization depends on the good will and self-discipline of our membership. While good will is almost always there, self-discipline is sometimes lacking.

Of course, NEFAC being a voluntary association, it is always dependent on the involvement of its members. There are, however, a number of little things to correct. First, there's a question of attitude. People often talk (or rather chat) a lot, and talk tough, but are often doing little on a daily basis. This means that the work is always done in a rush, similar to the rest of the activist culture. We would probably gain from initiating an organizational routine that would enable us to integrate our political tasks to our daily life. By that I mean to say that we should systemize certain tasks like collecting dues, paying magazines and newspapers, distributing propaganda, organizing meetings and events, developing supporter networks, building contacts, etc. In short, it could only help if we could learn to take ourselves a little bit more seriously.

At the level of theoretical and tactical unity, there are many assets. First, the very existence of NEFAC itself and our vision of revolutionary organization is a theoretical and tactical asset. Our strategic orientation is another asset. When we finally adopt a labor position paper (it's on the way, really!), we will have made another big step. We should, however, note that there is still an ambiguity: Is our intervention on the various fronts to be done by the creation of new radical mass organizations which will radicalize "from outside" the existing social movements, or is it to be done by our direct involvement in already existing (reformist) mass organizations with the goal of radicalizing them? Our current experience hasn't led us to any final conclusions one way or the other, and it is not clear that one strategy necessarily excludes the other.

We are not scared of that ambiguity. After all, we are anarchists and not Marxist-Leninists. We have no leaders, no established theoretical model, and no "correct line" to fall back on. Furthermore, we feel that our conception of organization is entirely human: we learn as we walk. Many are currently walking down the same road we have taken. The questions we struggle with are the same questions anarchists from all over the world are currently struggling with. Whether they are called "especifista" or "platformist", our current is taking shape everywhere.

NEFAC does not have all the answers, nor would we claim otherwise. We continue to be faced with many tough questions and no easy answers: how political minorities can be a radicalizing force within mass-based struggles without compromising democracy and accountability; how to win short-term victories without falling outside of a long-term revolutionary framework; how to build truly transnational and multi-lingual organizations and movements; or how best to develop strategies for building social power and cultures of resistance within areas of struggle.

We are continually challenging ourselves, testing our theories with practice, and learning from our collective experiences... but in order to get to a level where we feel we need to be as a revolutionary organization, there is still a long and uncertain road ahead of us.

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# Where They Retreat, We Must Advance: Dual Power as Revolutionary Strategy

by Wesley Morgan

*"...we will take or win all possible reforms with the same spirit that one tears occupied territory from the enemy's grasp in order to go on advancing, and we will always remain enemies of every government..."* Malatesta (1965: 83)

Reformists have been accused of sacrificing long-term goals to short-term expediency, and revolutionaries, on the other hand, have too often sacrificed the concerns of today to a vision of tomorrow. Building a revolutionary strategy implies thinking about how our short-term, medium-term, and long-term activities are linked, as what we do today influences what we do tomorrow. The first part of this essay will discuss the general terms of revolutionary strategy, the second part will turn to a consideration of revolutionary strategy in the current historical context. This analysis focuses on the Canadian context, but the issues involved have implications that are relevant on an international scale.

## Broader Considerations

Questions of strategy loom large in anarchist discussions, as do concerns regarding our marginalization as a movement -- I am sure that there are no anarchists who have not been told that anarchism is "just not possible". Moreover, revolutionary groups face an uphill battle because most revolutionary situations have led, in the end, to tyranny. In the chaos that often follows revolutions, so-called revolutionary groups have generally re-created the institutional life of the "Old Regime".

Abstract promises of a grand liberatory revolution are simply not sufficient. While I am a committed anarchist, I cannot fault people who see an anarchist revolution as unachievable. Social domination structures our experience so systematically that it begins to acquire a "facticity" and appears to be "just the way things are done". It is very sensible and practical not to worry about changing things that you can do little about, like the weather. We always make decisions within the context of external constraint, getting on with life means accepting these constraints and making decisions within those limits. Because domination is so pervasive, addressing it literally involves a revolution, it requires fundamental changes in the way that we organize our social, political, and economic institutions. If we reject domination, which is the basis for the dictatorial "one-man rule" model of workplace organization and the ability of a person to control others on the basis of a specific organizational role, what do we have? How will things get done? Does it mean breaking society apart and going off to live in the woods? In contrast to "one-man rule", advocates of self-man-

agement have long advanced radically democratic models of workplace organization.

For most sensible people, however, self-management might be a nice idea, but it is simply not possible, domination is just "how things get done". All individuals construct their frameworks of interpretation and understanding in terms of their concrete material experiences. The compelling force of a lifetime of direct experience with authority suggests that authority is necessary, although unpleasant. People might think that it would be nice to sprout wings out of their backs and fly around, but their materially-rooted interpretive frameworks, based upon concrete material experience tell them that this is unlikely to happen. Unfortunately, for many, the concept of self-management goes into the same category. It is noteworthy in this context that a study of attitudes towards workplace democracy found that for both managers and workers the single greatest predictor of support for workplace democracy was experience with workplace democracy (Collom, 2003: 88). Why? Because people who have experienced workplace democracy have had the experience of democratic workplace relations actually working. Revolutionaries, and anarchist-communists in particular, need to offer more than dreams and critiques of the status quo. These creative and critical skills are necessary but not sufficient. The challenge lies in building practical, livable alternatives. The only thing that can puncture the hegemony of dictatorial workplace ideologies is concrete, material, living proof of democratic workplaces, and practical experience with these modes of organizing. As the saying goes, actions speak louder than words. What might be termed the "propaganda value" of dual power organizations [1] is crucial in building a strong and broadly based mass movement. If anarchists can actually show people that self-management works, then we can be taken seriously when we agitate for a self-managed society.

However, beyond the "propaganda value" of dual power organizations, dual power is an essential element of going beyond an insurrectionary politics, towards a more broadly revolutionary politics. Beyond practically demonstrating that self-management works, building dual power organizations is valuable because it begins to develop the infrastructure of the revolution, to create the active capacity for self-management. As Malatesta suggests, the origin and justification for authority lies in social disorganization.

*"When a community has needs and its members do not know how to organize spontaneously to provide them, someone comes forward, an authority who satisfies those needs by utilizing the services of all and directing them to his liking... organization, far*

from creating authority, is the only cure for it and the only means whereby each one of us will get used to taking an active and conscious part in collective work, and cease to be passive instruments in the hands of leaders..." (1965: 86)

Social structure and organization are both crucial because an industrial society requires a high degree of coordination, which involves a great deal of complex organization. In every insurrectionary moment that we can observe, chaos and difficulties centering on issues of coordination were acute in the opening phases of the revolution. In each case, purportedly revolutionary juntas recreated the institutional structure of the "Old Regime". As deeply flawed as the "Old Regime" was, as much as these groups railed against it, they re-created it because at least it got things done. As Malatesta suggests to us, this is only to be expected. Unless revolutionaries have practical solutions, and have already begun to be able to provide revolutionary means of re-organizing social life in all of its concrete details, chaos will follow the insurrection. In general, in times of uncertainty people naturally fall back on what they know, their sense of "how things get done".

In particular, a recurrent theme of revolutionary crisis centers around problems with supplies and the transportation of raw materials and important goods. In both the French and Russian Revolutions, the problem of getting food from the countryside into the cities was monumental. The Bolshevik's New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921 re-introduced capitalistic reforms in the context of a bureaucratic and authoritarian state-not unlike the basic relations of production that marked the Czarist era (Pollack, 1959: 61). As bad as this arrangement was, and as much as they had ideologically railed against the exact same things under the Czar, the Bolsheviks found that this bureaucratic, or state capitalism [2], at least formed a basis for social coordination. Franz Schurmann reported that the land reforms introduced in the Maoist era were comparable with traditional imperial forms, with the collectives and communes resembling patterns of state control and militarization of the peasantry in projects of corvee labor in imperial China (cited in Rapp, 2001: 15). In fact, he compares the Maoist rural collectivization policies with the military farms policy, or *tuntian*, of imperial China (14). In the Spanish Revolution, problems of coordination proved problematic, specifically centering around exchange. In some regions of Spain, they tried to abolish money altogether, but found themselves resorting either to rationing of one sort or another, or the production of local currencies. Once again, in a problematic situation, they fell back upon the old routines which were familiar, and which coordinated action in the past. It is not sufficient to create a negative contradiction within society, that is, to create a revolutionary rupture through organized opposition. This is necessary, but not sufficient.

It is necessary to move from an insurrectionary strategy, focused on the creation of a negative contradiction (against all forms of social domination), to a revolutionary strategy, the creation of a positive contradiction. As I suggested, times of crisis tend to breed reaction more than they breed revolution, as people will fall back on what they are familiar with-social organization based on authoritarianism. Indeed, one of the key crises of capitalism in the last century was the Great Depression, which gave rise not to an international proletarian revolution but to Fascism. We need not only a strong oppositional movement, but we need to be able to organize social life on a self-managed basis, to provide the practical basis for a revolutionary society. Indeed, Malatesta suggested that not only must revolutionaries be able to maintain social

production, but we must be able to *increase* production and to eliminate poverty [3]. To fail to do so is to breed counter-revolution and reaction, as post-insurrectionary chaos breeds uncertainty. In this context, there is a general tendency to revert back to the old ways of doing things (i.e. through authoritarian institutions). These old solutions may be problematic, but they at least coordinate social life on a day-to-day basis.

## The Historical Context

While this discussion has been focused at the level of general revolutionary principles, these general principles are only meaningful when they are applied to specific historical contexts. At this juncture, we are living in a period where neo-liberalism has been bringing back the aggressive forms of capitalism that created such militant struggles as those of the IWW a century ago. Indeed, many of the issues are similar, such as the use and abuse of temporary workers, the marginalization of whole groups of workers in the economy, and the elimination of basic trade union freedoms.

In the last thirty years in particular, the State and the capitalist class have acted in a highly coordinated fashion, causing the ongoing breakdown of the "class compromise" of the post-WWII period. In this process we have seen the disciplining of the industrial working class and the creation of the "rust belt" in Canada and the United States. At the same time, the post-WWII class compromise (i.e. the welfare state) -- healthcare, education, social services -- are increasingly being cut adrift by the state, often being privatized. Even in the cases where the jobs in these sectors remain public, quasi-market reforms are introduced.

Neo-liberal reforms have had the general effect of creating real contradictions in the lives of public sector workers. In the era of the welfare state these areas of the economy were made part of the public sector, and these jobs were ones that tended to revolve around the provision of "caring" for members of the public (i.e. nurses, teachers, etc). While there are real differences between the labor processes of public sector workers, in general the labor processes associated with caring labor in the public sector have created loyalties, commitments, and allegiances that reflect the caring orientation of most of these jobs. These values, commitments, and allegiances were not anti-capitalist when they existed alongside the private sector. However, when market mechanisms are imposed in the public sector, these values, commitments, and allegiances are drawn into active contradiction with the pursuit of profit.

It seems that, in general, when work in the caring sectors of the economy is subjected to market mechanisms, the priority shifts from the provision of service and building relationships with members of the public to the maximization of profit. Performing caring labor is taxing both in terms of the time it requires and the emotional investment it involves. However, profit mechanisms reorient workplace priorities to ensure that workers spend *less* time with *more* patients. A much more profitable situation than spending more time with fewer patients. Both the quality of care that these workers are able to deliver and the quality of their work life decline as neo-liberal managers reorganize work. Throughout this sector of the economy these largely female groups of workers are seeing their work intensify dramatically, their earnings stagnate or decline, and their ability to care for the people they work with deteriorates. In these situations, burnout becomes increasingly common and endemic, and attempting to care for the public becomes more and more difficult. As a clerical worker who was involved at a staff strike at McMaster University put it, "it wasn't about people anymore, it

was a business, it was about making a profit." Neo-liberal restructuring of the public sector creates a contradiction between the work that these workers want to do and their ability to do it, and because of this it has begun to create not only an a-capitalist ethic, but an anti-capitalist ethic among these groups of workers.

As capitalists and politicians re-structure the public sector according to the demands of the market, these market mechanisms undermine the ability of public sector workers to engage in caring labor. It is then the operation of the market itself that becomes problematic, and the profit-motive is increasingly identified as the source of crises in the daily labor of these workers. It is through the State that these reforms are being imposed, meaning that both the State and the capitalist class are implicated in these reforms. Furthermore, the imposition of neo-liberalism has a disproportionate effect on female workers, creating contradictions not only in terms of the class relations which these workers are drawn into, but also highlighting their subordination in the patriarchal division of labor. It is for these reasons that it was precisely these groups of workers who considered a General Strike in British Columbia this year. While bargaining with hospital workers the provincial government of BC not only attempted to engage in concession bargaining, they also aggressively pursued contracting out and privatization, causing lay-offs. When these workers went out on strike the government attempted to legislate them back to work. In response, provincial teachers, transit and ferry workers, mill, steel and forestry workers, garbage and city maintenance workers, as well as library, community and recreation centre employees came close to joining a general strike, before labor leaders negotiated a settlement that was widely condemned as a sell-out.

Anarchists have been active in fighting neo-liberalism, but we also have to recognize that capitalism in its less sophisticated form creates certain openings for revolutionary strategy. The withdrawal, or retreat, of the State from the public sector opens up the space for the creation of dual power, the organization of an autonomous, community-based public sector that is organized according to principles of self-management, an anti-State public sector.

It is difficult to underestimate the revolutionary effect of organizing to create, and support, self-managed community services. There are even examples of this in North America- the Black Panther Party, at their strongest, ran over 60 social programs, such as schools, meal programs, and shoe programs. While the Black Panthers fell victim to their marginalization in ghetto communities, police repression, and internal power struggles that were partially related to the effects of the FBI's counter-intelligence program (COINTELPRO), this model of community organization is one that still holds a great deal of potential. In the case of the Spanish anarchist movement in the 1930's, part of their strength relied upon the mutual aid societies, schools, and workers' centers that they organized. Indeed, a significant proportion of the literate working class was educated in anarchist schools in Spain in the 1920's and 1930's. It should come as no surprise that after the Spanish revolution/civil war broke out, anarchist schools flourished-as anarchists had a great deal of experience at organizing and running schools.

By advancing where the state has retreated, by beginning to create a community-based, anti-State public sector, anarchists can begin to generate a broad-based movement that has the organizational capacity to create a fully self-managed society. The public sector is strategically crucial also because of the fact that these institutions would not only re-organize the work life of public workers, but they would also be central and tied into life in the community more generally. Moreover, it would begin to develop the revolu-

tionary capacity of anarchists to organize for the administration of public life through federated institutions that are genuinely democratic. Unfortunately, anarchist attempts to create "dual power" through the creation of cooperatives often create what might be termed "market syndicalism". While these cooperatives are internally self-managing, they exist as units in a market economy and still rely upon access to the market. Building an autonomous public sector begins to develop the practical revolutionary infrastructure to make not only the State, but also the market irrelevant in social life.

This is the general strategy, to attempt to create dual power in the public sector, to build autonomous, community-based, self-managed social infrastructure-schools, clinics, mutual aid organizations, perhaps hospitals one day-to help create a revolutionary process of organizing without hierarchy or domination. Where the state has retreated, we must advance, and begin organizing to fill the gap in a liberatory manner, to build the revolutionary capacity and potential for an end to all forms of domination and hierarchy.

On a final note, however, I should add that as anarchists it is our duty to support all workers. However, in relation to these workers in the public sector, I would suggest that it is particularly important to support and organize. In doing so we should agitate and organize to begin to introduce radical critique and direct action where it is appropriate. In solidarity organizing, anarchists can begin to develop ties with workers in these sectors, and begin to discuss and organize dual power. It is also crucial to recognize that, in our capacity as revolutionary organizers, most of us don't have the skills or the knowledge to build these organizations from the ground up. Rather, in solidarity with workers who work in these sectors, we can begin to organize with them and their unions.

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### Notes

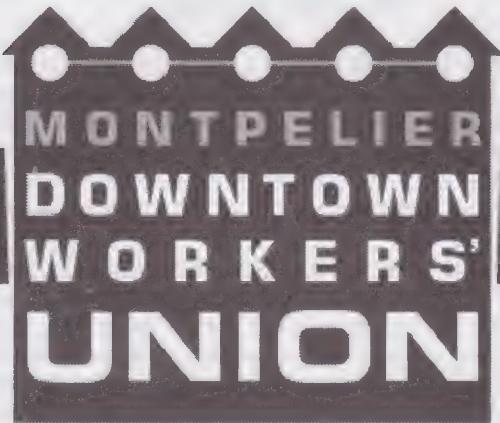
[1] That is to say, practical institutions, which are organized in a revolutionary fashion, that are autonomous from and opposed to capital and the State.

[2] Lenin, incidentally, coined this term himself for the purposes of describing Bolshevik Russia.

[3] Of course, this does not mean the mindless pursuit of productivity gains, the very nature of production needs to change in the process, away from profit and towards need.

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# Building Working Class Democracy One City at a Time

by Dave

Under the shadow of the Green Mountains, workers in Vermont's capital city (population 7,900) have been building direct democracy and power on the job for more than a year and a half. The city of Montpelier, whose downtown shops are largely composed of independently owned businesses, is the site of a new, innovative labor union known as the Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union, UE Amalgamated Local 221 (MDWU). Unlike traditional unions, the Downtown Workers' are organized geographically, effectively incorporating people employed in the service, retail, and nonprofit sectors in different shops all throughout the city. The union legally represents workers in a number of contracted shops as well as workers in minority shops. In addition, the union claims a number of majorities where they have not yet won legal recognition and a contract.

Through this union, all of these workers are brought together under one big tent where their collective voice can no longer be ignored by the bosses, and where their power is felt even by the elite and those that follow. With or without a contract, this union fights for the rights of all downtown employees and is building real working class power in this northern capital city, and all by practicing directly democratic means.

## Origins, Necessities, and Eventualities

As Vermont's once powerful manufacturing base (which formally included highly productive towns from Brattleboro to Springfield [1] to Newport) has increasingly jumped ship for the super-exploited markets of Mexico and China, the economy in this small New England state (pop. 600,000) has become increasingly reliant upon an expanding service and retail sector to offset massive job loss. Of course the vast majority of these jobs pay a fraction of what they are replacing, and carry little to no benefits. In addition, 79% of Vermont's businesses employ nine or less workers. Because of the separateness and sheer quantity of these jobs, and because of the small number of employees who labor in each individual shop, most of the traditional unions have not been interested in expending their limited resources in order to organize these workers. This stands true throughout the nation. For many unions such endeavors represent an untried gamble that they are currently not willing to take, even if that is where the majority of the labor force is increasingly situated.

Finding themselves isolated from the organizational power of the more established labor movement, it is extremely difficult for such

employees to win a collective voice at work, much less effect positive long-lasting change in their working conditions and create local democracy. Ironically, as this mode of labor becomes more and more of a numerical majority of Vermont's (and elsewhere's) workforce, and as the traditional unions refrain from organizing these workers, the overall union base has become more tenuous. With that, organized labor has risked becoming outpaced by capitalist interests, and losing what political clout they maintained for the last 100 years. In a word, it is becoming increasingly clear to all who pay attention that if the class struggle in the Green Mountains (and the rest of the developed world) is not to lose ground and instead to move forward, something has to be done. And again, as long as the larger more conservative unions sit on the sideline, it is possible that those unions and workers who do step forward will be in a better position to create locals devoid of arbitrary hierarchies and bureaucracies. In other words, in the near virgin territory of small service and retail shops opens the possibility of organizing workers according to truly democratic and self-empowering means.

## Enter the Vermont Workers' Center

In the spring of 2003, James Haslem, the director of the Montpelier based Vermont Workers' Center (VWC), began to float the idea of establishing an "All Workers' Union" in the capital city in order to empower those who work in small shops, and as a way to begin organizing those in the fastest growing, and lowest paying sector. This idea sprang out of numerous conversations with area employees about work conditions, as well as the numerous negative calls the center received in the previous five years on their Workers Rights Hotline relating to shops in that city.

By the summer of 2003, the independent and rank and file oriented United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE) became interested in the project, and before long these two organizations (the VWC and UE) agreed to split the cost of the project and move forward towards concrete organizing. It was no mistake that this project was being launched by these two organizations. The Vermont Workers' Center is a coalition of unions (including the UE, Vermont State Employees Association, and the entire Vermont AFL-CIO), rank and file workers, and allied organizations representing a staggering 25,000 Vermont workers (out of a total labor force of just over 330,000). It was founded six years ago, in a large part by anarchists formerly in the Love and Rage #10

Collective [2]. Today, the center remains committed to building real working class democracy and the fulfillment of basic social needs. Internally the center operates through democratic means [3].

The UE, for its part, is a democratically run leftwing union which was formally based in the industrial sector. Presently the UE officially reports having 30,000 total members across the United States. Known to include many members of the old Communist Party, USA, the UE has recognized the new reality of the consumer based economy for some time, and has been experimenting in finding ways of getting a foothold in the growing service and retail sector. In the months prior to agreeing to this new project, they successfully organized the two largest downtown supermarkets in the Vermont cities of Burlington and Montpelier.

Eventually the VWC and UE decided to pare-down the target population to focus on the estimated 800 service, retail, and, later, nonprofit workers employed throughout the Montpelier city limits. Here it deserves mention that although

the UE is a democratically run union, such democracy does not formally take effect until after a shop or a group of workers is constituted as their own local, or is merged into an existing local. Until that time, the lead organizer, who in this case was Kim Lawson, has final say in regards to tactics and strategy. It would not be until the spring of 2004 that the Downtown Workers Union, who at that time became part of local 221, would gain absolute authority over their direction and policy. Even so, the workers exercised a considerable amount of democratic power during the early and middle phases of the campaign. This can be accredited to the commitment to internal democracy on the part of certain key organizers, as well as the persistent voice of the workers themselves.

What made this union drive different from others was the fact that the goal was not to target a single specific shop, but instead to attempt to bring together workers from dozens of small individual shops into one citywide local and seek, among other things, to implement one unified labor contract for all workers in these sectors: *geographic unionism*. Montpelier was picked as the location for three reasons: (1) As the capital, a successful organizing campaign would carry with it a higher degree of statewide media attention and symbolism. This could eventually lead to similar projects being launched in other Vermont towns and cities. (2) Months before the UE successfully organized the largest retail shop in the city (the Hunger Mountain Food Coop-75 workers), and it was therefore hoped that those workers would voluntarily lend a hand in the early phases of the new drive [4]. (3) The headquarters of both the Vermont Workers' Center and the Vermont AFL-CIO are both located in Montpelier, and therefore it would be easier to organize on-the-street support for the new union than in other locations.



*Vermont Workers Center demonstration, May 2003*

### The First Strategy

The initial strategy employed by campaign organizers was to quietly sign up as many workers to the union as fast as possible, and to seek as many specific shop majorities in as short a time as possible. After majorities were reached in a significant number of shops, the union would publicly announce itself and demand legal recognition from effected shops. In turn, these shops would seek the implementation of a basic, uniform contract which would require a fifty cent raise and require employers to work towards a livable wage, establish a formal grievance procedure on the shop floor were workers' concerns could not be ignored by management, and protect workers from unjust firings. Armed with one full time organizer, Tenaya Lafore, and financed jointly by the Workers' Center and UE, the part time efforts of Kim Lawson (the lead UE organizer), James Haslem (of the Workers' Center), a small core of sympathetic workers and volunteers (including a small number of Vermont Progressive Party and NEFAC-Vermont members), and others from the community, the organizing drive took off with speed and promise.

Within the first few months of the drive, an Organizing Committee of 15 workers from 10 separate shops was formed. Soon after, pro-union majorities were reached at six different shops, which totaled 75. Upon reaching these half a dozen majorities, the Workers' Center, UE, and rank and file union members held their first press conference announcing the existence of the union and demanding recognition and contracts at these shops. The mood among workers and organizers was optimistic. It was believed that the union could pressure the above businesses into voluntary recognition, and quickly move to win additional shops.

Here it should be noted that early on it was decided that the union would not pursue recognition through formal, federally monitored, elections. This decision was reached in light of the fact that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which monitors and regulates such elections, tends to work hand and glove with management, in opposition to union/worker interest. The NLRB is run by appointees of the President George Bush, and is notorious for allowing the bosses varying degrees of advantages, and even going so far as putting election results under wraps (in a kind of limbo) for years, thereby effectively tabling concerted union activity indefinitely. Therefore, it was instead decided to seek voluntary recognition, if need be, through public pressure [5].

### Capitalist Backlash

In the wake of this early success came an immediate backlash from a large segment of the bosses. Within weeks of going public, a significant number of business owners circled the proverbial wagons and began a sustained campaign of reactionary, anti-union propaganda through the capitalist media, and intimidation and scare tactics on the job. The worst of these shops was J. Morgan's. Others included the Coffee Corner diner, Capital Grounds coffee shop, and M & M Beverage and Redemption Center. Of course, the activity of the owners was not uniform. A minority of the smaller shops (primarily those that could not afford to employ anyone, those that employed only occasional or limited help, and those where owners still were compelled to hold a second job as a common worker) voiced support for the union. These included The Book Garden and La Pizio shoes. In sociological terms, certain Marxist predictions proved themselves true. The wealthier owners

(those who owned multiple businesses and/or controlled large portions of property -i.e. the local bourgeoisie), stood firmly against the workers. On the other hand, the allegiances of the petit-bourgeoisie became split with a minority of this sub-class identifying with the workers.

At J. Morgan's Steakhouse (an upscale restaurant), the owners (the multi-millionaire Bashara family) quickly moved to hire the union-busting law firm Gallagher and Flynn. There, waitress Val Tofani, an outspoken union supporter, was fired for dubious reasons. Other union members had their hours cut and were taken off the more lucrative shifts. Management also harassed and threatened union supporters, installed security cameras to spy on workers, and had employees follow home after work.

Workers in other shops also began to feel the pressure. As the hammer began to come down, many began to distance themselves from the union. Although one in eight (100 total) from the service and retail sector signed a petition making themselves union members, the effective public strength of the organization was beginning to decline. Of the original six majority shops, only one, the Savoy, recognized the union and signed a contract. At the others, workers began to retreat from their public support of the union as bosses began to threaten and intimidate those who they suspected of signing union cards or even considering signing union cards.

The union attempted to retaliate in several ways. To build broader support for the organization, a Community Solidarity Committee was formed which included more than 20 people from within non-UE unions (NEA, VSEA, Teamsters, Carpenters, Iron Workers, Nurses, etc.), retirees, and others. These folks, alongside downtown workers from within the Organizing Committee sought various ways to maintain the union's momentum despite the bosses' counter attack.

At J. Morgan's a number of informational pickets were held. The largest picket drew 200 people from the labor movement (both Downtown Workers and those from other unions). Union members and supporters also held a 'coffee in' at the restaurant where most if not all the tables were filled up, and nothing but coffee was ordered. Here servers were delivered encouraging pro-union messages and large tips, while the owners made pennies on what would have otherwise been a lucrative dinner rush. The message was clear.

In December 2003, a union member also gained entrance to the restaurant dressed as 'Santa Clause', where he made a public scene announcing that the owners were being delivered the "Grinch of The Year Award" for their union busting activities and unfair treatment of workers. In addition to losing thousands of dollars in business due to the bad publicity and pickets, many organizations such as the Older Woman's League and VSEA pulled their plans to hold events there and at the adjoining hotel. Finally, the union filed 28 'unfair labor practice' charges with the federal government on behalf of those workers and union members that received the wrath of management. With this, what began as periodic pickets at the steakhouse became organized weekly events. These pickets, and the unofficial boycott, continued until the 28 charges were settled in the summer of 2004 [6]. In a word, the union busting owners lost tens of thousands of dollars in revenue, and were compelled to spend an estimated quarter of a million on attorney fees; all this to avoid paying 40 employees fifty cents more an hour, and allowing shop floor democracy from gaining a foothold.

Beyond the actions targeting J. Morgan's, workers and community members circulated a petition throughout the community voicing popular support for the union. Here workers and volunteers went door to door collecting signatures, and also sought them out

at the weekly Farmers' Market. This proved to be an important activity because, in many cases, the person collecting signatures was the first person to inform folk of the struggle being launched downtown; after all, not everyone reads the newspapers and not everyone works in the city they live in. In one working class neighborhood (Barre Street), every single person who was home signed the petition with the exception of three. Eventually more than 700 people (the majority being Montpelier residents) signed it, and the UE and VWC had it printed as a full page add in the local newspaper (The Montpelier Bridge). Dozens of union supporters also wrote solidarity letters to all the area newspapers (The Barre-Montpelier Times-Argus, The Bridge, and the Burlington based Seven Days). One organizer from the National Educators Association, Ellen David-Friedman, recorded a pro-union, pro MDWU commentary which was broadcast statewide on Vermont Public Radio.

In addition, the union printed a small pamphlet which included the photos of a dozen downtown workers and their statements as to why they decided to join the union. This "speak out" was widely distributed all across the city. By February 2004, the Organizing Committee (and later the Stewards' Committee) published a regular newsletter called the Downtown Workers' Journal in which the specific union struggles, perspectives of downtown workers, and other related news was disseminated throughout the local community. This journal was (and continues to be) utilized as an organizing tool. It was and remains available in pro-union shops, and is handed out to workers by workers both on the job and in the streets. For it or against it, the union drive manifested as a real force, as well as a topic for tavern discussion and debate.

While the overall effect of all these actions clearly helped the union survive the initial counter attack, and to a limited extent helped recruit a number of strong new members, these actions on their own were not enough to propel the organization to acceptable levels of growth in numbers and power. And again, it should be noted that a huge portion of the union's energy was being used fighting the counterattack at J. Morgan's. This was being done at the expense of adequately focusing resources on the other, smaller shops that also had achieved an unrecognized union majority. Ultimately, it could be argued that this was a significant mistake. While the union's inclination of 'going after the biggest dog first' (J. Morgan's) had a degree of validity, the end result of not winning recognition there or, with the exception of the Savoy, in the other majority shops clearly represented a lost opportunity for quick success and long term stability. In short, by the late winter of 2004 it was becoming clear that the union needed to change its course if it were not only to survive, but gain a stronger, more active membership, and win more contracts. But what course should it take?

At this point, workers and organizers decided to reevaluate their strategy. Here it was decided to begin a new dialogue with downtown employees. To facilitate this discussion, the union drew up a simple survey which sought to ask workers what the most pressing issues were on the shop floor and among their class generally. Over the course of several weeks, the Organizing Committee, union/Worker Center staff, and community supporters stood on street corners asking people to fill out the survey. One eighth of those in the service and retail sector made their voice known. The top priority? *Protection against unfair discipline and firings*. Number two? *The desire to establish an effective grievance procedure to deal with issues which arise on the shop floor*. Now all that remained was to find a way to tap into these priorities that could demonstrate the power and relevance of a citywide workers' organization.

It was at this point that the UE Director of Organizing (the Pittsburgh based Bob Kingsley) made the decision to pull the funding for the full time organizing position. With the UE funding being cut, the Workers' Center was compelled to cut the bulk of their funding as well. It was further decided that the time had come for union members to be officially incorporated into Local #221 in order to gain the democratic link to the larger organization, and to start paying dues. The time had come for the union to start making progress becoming a self-sufficient organization or risk dissolution.

To many workers, this seemed a mixed blessing. On the one hand, being officially incorporated into a local would mean that they would formally gain the right to democratically direct their organization, but on the other hand, losing a full time organizer is a hard pill to swallow. After all, massive amounts of organizing remained to be done, and now the great bulk of that work would fall on the shoulders of people who were already working 40-60 hours a week to pay the bills. Again, the decision to require dues from all members, in conjunction with the bosses' anti-union campaign, resulted in the union effectively retaining only 25 workers, not including the 15 protected under the union contract at the Savoy. With these developments in place, the union's Organizing Committee decided to call for their first Worker Town Meeting.

### A Worker Town Meeting

Vermont has a 250-year history of participatory democratic Town Meetings. From the times of the first European settlers through the present, communities have relied upon the coming together of people in order to discuss, debate, and publicly vote on pressing issues as they arise. To this day, towns still gather on the first Tuesday of every March to pass resolutions, debate local budgets, and set agendas for the coming year. Given this context, it only seemed natural to seek the extension of such a tradition to apply to the class struggle in a given location. Therefore, the Organizing Committee decided to call together its larger membership in order to unveil the survey results, and see what folks wanted the union to do about it.

The meeting, held in April 2004, was well publicized and attracted workers from a dozen separate shops. After the Survey results were unveiled, a long conversation ensued which resulted in the unanimous passage of two strategic resolutions. First, the Organizing Committee would in effect be transformed into a Stewards' Committee, whose role it would be to facilitate a new citywide grievance procedure and to carry out the day-to-day operations of the union between Worker Town Meetings [7]. Second, this committee would also set up a new body of workers to be called the Workers' Defense Squad. It would be the role of the former to provide workers (both union members and non-union members) a means to resist unfair treatment on the job, and the role of the latter to back up this procedure in shops where the union would not have the legal rights allotted with a signed contract. In a sense, the collective will of the membership at this meeting was that the union should start to act like a union regardless of whether or not the bosses chose to recognize us.

Beyond these specific resolutions, this meeting was significant in that it set the precedent for union policy being democratically set by the membership as a whole. The organization had made the leap into direct democracy. Since that meeting, it has become the unwavering stance of the union to seek general direction and policy from the base, allowing officers such as the stewards no more power than

the ability to carry out the collective decisions of the whole. This event produced the sentiment that such empowered Worker Town Meetings would be held a minimum of twice a year in order to guarantee the direct control of the organization by its members.

### Citywide Grievance Procedure

The citywide grievance procedure which came out of that meeting was and remains structured as follows:

1) If and when a worker feels that they have been unfairly treated by their boss, they are encouraged to contact the steward responsible for the section of the city where they work.

2) The steward will then launch an investigation into the grievance to ensure that it is valid. This includes providing the boss a 'request of information form' that asks management for whatever files and information that may help in the investigation.

3) If the grievance is found to be valid, the steward delivers an official written grievance to the offending boss. This grievance will document the basic findings of the investigation, and will also include potential resolutions to the conflict (\*such proposed resolutions have a lot to do with the desires of the grievant and often includes requests for back pay, a letter of recommendation, the changing of certain work rules, reinstatement following a firing, etc.). The steward will then request a meeting with the boss in order to resolve the situation.

4) If the boss refuses to negotiate in good faith, a second written grievance is delivered by the elected Chief Steward, who then attempts to negotiate with the offending boss.

5) If the boss still refuses to deal, the Chief Steward can request, in writing, supportive action on the part of the Workers' Defense Squad. This grievance procedure differs from those employed by other labor groups, in that it does not concern itself with contracted shops alone, and it was made readily available to all downtown workers, not just union members.

Once this process was drawn up, a brief description of it, along with photos and phone numbers of area stewards were put to paper and distributed to workers all across the city. To facilitate this, stewards committed to give out these informative flyers to workers in their areas of responsibility. Similar to when we conducted the initial survey, this process had the secondary benefit of again creating a forum for worker/organizers and other downtown employees to discuss the union, how it functions, and what it intends on winning.

### Workers' Defense Squad

The other innovation that came out of the Workers Town Meeting was the Workers' Defense Squad. Here the Stewards' Committee was given the go ahead in organizing a body of people from the Montpelier area that would help give teeth to the grievance procedure. Their primary mission is to organize actions targeting bosses who failed to negotiate with the stewards in good faith. In principle, such action could include any number of ways which would result in disrupting the business of the offending boss. It was decided to sign up a contingent of people, a core belonging to the MDWU (excluding stewards), and the others coming from other labor unions. Within eight weeks, a squad was formed which included four people from the Downtown Union, and twelve more from other sources.

When the Stewards' Committee requires the intervention of the Defense Squad, they must make a formal request in writing, and provide them with all related grievance documents. At that point, the Chief Steward and the grievant are required to meet with the squad in order to explain the situation and answer questions. After this, the squad itself determines what supporting action to take. This grouping also concluded that it would not necessarily limit its activity to the grievance procedure. By a unanimous vote, it decided that it would, in principle, make itself available to other workers and other unions in Montpelier, in order to further the struggle of laboring people against the bosses. While the squad has two elected Chairs, one coming from the MDWU, the other from the Vermont Workers' Center Steering Committee, all collective decisions are made through the directly democratic means of the membership. The MDWU Chair also sits on the union's Stewards' Committee.

This new organization was quickly made known to the business community. Its very existence has made the bosses more willing to deal with the union than could have otherwise been expected. In brief, they either deal with the cool headed stewards, or they face the concerted effort of a group who has no choice other than to aggressively pursue them.

### A New Contract and Citywide Elections

As the union began reorient itself, Steward Kristin Warner, a 22-year-old Montpelier native, not only signed up the majority of workers at her shop, Mountain Café, but reached an agreement with the owner on voluntary recognition. Within weeks the union won its second contract, this one giving protection to ten more workers. The contract at the Mountain Café made it the only unionized restaurant in the state of Vermont.

Also at this time, and in accordance with the new directives set forth at the Worker Town Meeting, a citywide election open to all union members in good standing was held for the position of Chief Steward. In a tight race, which involved 75% of eligible voters, Kristin won the position. From this moment on, the organization began to unquestionably direct itself, and the age-old reactionary claim that the MDWU was no more than a puppet of unseen labor officials was forever crushed. The Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union clearly became an organization of the workers, for the workers, and by the workers.

### Street Victories

Even before the official procedure was set up, the union had won at least two grievances. In one instance, Amanda Lyon, a member of the Organizing Committee and La Pizzeria employee of four years, had her hours drastically cut by management. It became clear that the motivation for this came from the boss' anti-union, sexist worldview. Upon hearing this, a delegation of workers went down to the restaurant and confronted the boss. Within 72 hours of this intervention, the boss called union organizers and informed them that he would give Amanda back much of her time. The other early victory came when Kristen Warner, prior to gaining employment at Mountain Café, was turned away from a job at Capital Grounds because of her public support for the union. In this instance, Dave Kazinski of the Iron Workers sat down with the offending boss, Bob Watson, and informed him that such actions were both illegal and morally reprehensible. The boss caved and offered to hire Kristen. These actions, although coming before the establishment of the more formalized system, gave the union con-

fidence that they were capable of winning real victories, even without contracts.

After the official system was in place, it was not long before workers began calling their stewards in order to lodge grievances. At Shaw's supermarket, a worker (who was not a MDWU member) was taken off the schedule because she refused to remove an anti-George Bush Jr. pin while other workers were allowed to wear pins that supported the war, certain religious beliefs, and other causes. After her steward, Ellen Thomson, presented the boss with a 'request of information form', management immediately gave her hours back, and rationalized the pin rule. This worker joined the union.

At J. Morgan's union members again became the target of what appeared to be dubious written warnings in regards to alleged infractions. It was feared that these actions were the prelude to terminations. Union steward Jessie Rosado filed a grievance, and management agreed to state, in writing, that the documents in question should not be perceived as disciplinary measures.

At Julio's, a bartender (who was not a MDWU member) was fired for telling her boss that she may need time off because of an illness. Her steward, Kristin Warner, investigated the matter and found that the boss's actions were in violence of the Family Medical Leave Act. Upon delivering a formal grievance, the steward came to a negotiated settlement with the boss that, among other things, resulted in the worker getting her job back. This person also joined the union.

At Mountain Café, which is a contracted shop, the owner fired a number of cooks for reasons not relating to their job performance. Stewards Kristin Warner and Sean Damon were able to get compensation for those cooks who wanted it, and got one person his job back with back pay.

Most recently the union won a big victory at Coffee Corner. There, owner/boss Brian Mitosky, fired a waitress. She contacted her steward, Nick Robinson, and the subsequent investigation resulted in the union verifying the validity of her grievance. This was put in writing and delivered to the boss. After being briefly side tracked by meetings with attorneys (representing the grievant and the boss), the union was able to help negotiate a very good settlement involving a letter of recommendation and monetary compensation. This worker is now a member of the union.

However, not all the grievances turn out perfectly. In these circumstances, the union has still managed to inflict punitive damages upon the offending bosses. In one instance, a Capital Plaza Hotel (owned by the Bashara family) worker was fired because of a mistake made by the boss, Laura Bashara. While the union was unable to negotiate a reasonable settlement with management, Chief Steward Kristen Warner was able to convince the Vermont National Educators Association not to hold a large event there. This cost the hotel thousands and thousands of dollars. In another-



*Members of the Montpelier Downtown Workers Union*

er instance, a bartender was fired from Charlie O's for no apparent reason. Like before, area steward Nicole Schaeffer and Chief Steward Kristin Warner, were unable to negotiate a settlement. However the union did help the worker win his unemployment claim, and did organize a retaliatory action at the establishment. This action consisted of 70 patrons showing up on a Saturday night wearing stickers in support of the fired bartender. As part of the action patrons refused to tip the offending manager, Stacey Shibly; one could consider it a *tip strike*. Also, a former bartender took it upon herself to give the manager a piece of her mind. This resulted in her smashing a glass against the wall behind the bar.

Even in these situations where the union failed to win clear victories, they demonstrated their willingness to fight, and their ability to disrupt business as usual. This clearly put pressure on the bosses to deal with us, regardless of whether their shop has legal union recognition or not.

As of print, stewards are fielding additional grievances across the city, and we suspect that we will win more victories and more union members as the year goes on. No matter how one looks at it, the fact that the MDWU has won clear victories in seven out of nine grievances (6 of them in 'non-union' shops) is a damn good track record, even when compared to locals that operate exclusively in shops that possess binding union contracts. The union and the citywide grievance procedure has established itself as an important weapon in the local class struggle.

### Union Holds Public Hearing At City Hall

In late June 2004, not long after the citywide grievance procedure was established, the union organized a public hearing on the wages and working conditions in the local service and retail sector. The hearing, held at City Hall, included testimony on patterns of unjust firings, suspect pay practices, and the lack of respect given to workers by the bosses. Testifying were workers from Aubuchon's Hardware, the Thrush Tavern, J. Morgan's, Mountain Café, Brooks Pharmacy, Hunger Mountain Co-op, as well as many other shops. Present in the audience were more than 70 community members. Also in attendance was an official listening panel composed of the mayor, Democrat Mary Hooper, two city councilmen (Jim Sheridan and Chris Smart), and a number of well-respected activists from the community. The hearing received newspaper coverage and was broadcast on a cable access TV station.

This hearing allowed workers to tell their stories to the broader community. As these stories were told, a clear picture began to emerge as to why it was necessary to build such a union in Montpelier. By bringing so many people to the event and by making the event even more accessible via media coverage, the union was able to galvanize their efforts in the ongoing organizing campaign. The success of the hearing said to the public, 'the union has arrived', and is here to stay.

### Union Expands Organizing Scope

In the summer of 2004, union members held a strategy retreat were, among other things, it was decided to expand the scope of the union to include not only service and retail workers, but also those from within the nonprofit sector. In addition, the definition of the service sector was made to include those working in health and childcare related shops. If any worker in the Montpelier city limits who labored in such shops sought to join the union, they

would be allowed to on the spot. However, the union also recognized that a number of workers who did not labor in these sectors, but who worked in other small shops, may seek membership in the MDWU. It was decided that their membership would have to be approved by a majority vote of the rank and file.

The decision to seek the inclusion of the non-profit sector was spurred by the proposed incorporation of a number of employees of the Vermont Center for Independent Living (VCIL). VCIL, a non-profit organization that seeks to help handicapped persons live a dignified, independent life, were themselves seeking to win union recognition with the UE for some months. Being one vote short on a clear majority, they and the MDWU decided that rather than to hold off on forming a union, they would merge with the Downtown Workers. With them joining the MDWU, and with the further decision to accept workers from other sectors pending approval from the membership, the union began to come full circle. The original idea of an 'All Workers' Union' could again be seen on the horizon.

To what extent workers from these other sectors will be represented by the MDWU is a question that only time will tell. However, as the struggle continues, it is likely that the union will take up the fight with those being exploited by the bosses whenever they are asked to. The union is about building overall class power as much as it is about building specific power in any one or two sectors.

### A Force In City Politics

Up until October of 2004 the union stayed focused on the symbiotic tasks of building a stronger membership base and protecting workers from unfair discipline and firings. However, all of that was soon to change. Leading up to the November 2nd elections, it came to the union's attention that a special resolution would appear on the city ballot. This resolution would give the city council the authority to begin discussions with the state aimed at creating a local 1% tax on all services and goods.

After researching the effects that such a tax would have on the community, the union discovered that the only people to directly benefit would be property owners who make over \$40,000 a year. These select few would receive a reduction of their property tax in the ballpark of \$200 a year. Most downtown employees are renters and tend to earn close to the minimum wage. They would not gain anything from this new tax. The only effect it would have on them would be that they would be paying 1% more for every sandwich and cup of coffee they bought. As such, the tax seemed to effectively amount to no more than a pay cut for our members. The Stewards' Committee called a special general membership meeting to discuss the issue and to see what, if any, position the union should take. There it was unanimously voted to publicly oppose the tax and to encourage workers to vote against it.

Following this decision, the union with the support of the Workers' Center held a public discussion on the issue at city hall. There a number of workers, officials from the state tax department, and the mayor listened to the reasons the union opposed the measure. In addition, "Workers, Vote No on The Local Option Tax!" flyers were posted all around the city. Oddly enough, by opposing this tax, the union, for the first time, ended up on same side of an issue as the business owners (through for different reasons). On November 2nd, the union's first sortie into city politics ended in a resounding victory. The measure was soundly defeated.

## Second Worker Town Meeting

In late fall, 2004, the union, now protecting 25 workers in two contracted shops, and claiming an additional 25 members in more than a dozen other shops, held its second Worker Town Meeting. Like before, workers from twelve different shops were present. The meeting sought to review and evaluate the work of the organization since the last gathering. It also sought to ask the membership what direction it should take in the next six months.

Here it was decided that the union would develop a new survey that would seek the general opinion of downtown workers as to what the minimum standards in working conditions should be in Montpelier. It was further resolved that the aim of this survey would be the creation of "The Montpelier Standard." After this standard is developed, the union will seek to have area shops endorse it. By endorsing it, management will be expected to treat their workforce according to this basic criterion. In return, the union will encourage community members to bring their business there. While the details and even basic outline of the standard are still being worked out, one thing is clear: the basic goal of the Montpelier Standard will be to pressure area businesses into uplifting the basic working conditions of the downtown employees.

As of print, the Stewards' Committee has produced the basic survey, and is in the process of fine-tuning it. The stewards have also committed to getting 200 workers to fill them out. It is expected that this project will serve as a means to actively involve a second tier of union leaders: those not willing or ready to serve on the labor intensive Stewards' Committee, but still desiring to be active. Finally, the survey will again serve as a means to open up a new round of discussions with those who may not yet be members of the union, but are employed downtown. It is expected that this process will lead to a further growth in the overall membership.

This second Worker Town Meeting also witnessed an official proposal to incorporate certain bylaws. The union functions through directly democratic means. It was therefore proposed to formalize these practices. One union member presented the organization with a set of concrete proposals. These included maintaining the biannual Worker Town Meeting system, formalizing the means by which workers and stewards can call for additional Worker Town Meetings, requiring a citywide vote (of dues paying members) on the overall citywide contract, etc. The adoption of any finalized bylaws will require the participation of the entire membership. It is not foreseen that the larger UE will oppose any of these proposals. After all, in the UE the members, for better or worse, really do run the union.

The proposal was made available to all present at the Worker Town Meeting. In the coming weeks it will be sent out to those members who were not present. After this, members will be encouraged to come to a special meeting where the proposed bylaws will be discussed and amended. Finally, any such amended version will again be made available to the entire membership and again voted on. This participatory process will dictate that no finalized set of bylaws will come into being until this spring, at the earliest.

## The Struggle Today and in The Future

As of February, 2005, the union includes 25 workers (in two businesses) protected by a contract, as well as 25 more who are members in other shops. While this may seem small, one should keep in mind that the total population of Montpelier is over 1000 times smaller than New York City. In a word, 50 workers in more than a dozen

different shops is a significant presence in this small New England city. Even so, it is our hope to win more contracts, and increase the at large membership over the course of the coming year (Note: organizing drives are currently underway in new shops). This will be done by virtue of our continuing victories using the citywide grievance procedure and by making new contacts through the survey.

Over the course of the last year and a half, The Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union has proven that geographic unionism using directly democratic principles is possible. It has demonstrated the way forward for workers in other towns, neighborhoods, and cities. In the coming decade, we hope to be able to export this model across the Green Mountains and beyond. We recognize that in order for working people to build real power, we must continuously organize afield and afar. In Vermont, that means in the smallest rural towns, as well as in cities like Burlington and Rutland. Furthermore, we recognize that the ultimate power of the working class cannot be limited to any single state or region. Working folks must rise up wherever they labor.

We are proud to report that since the MDWU has formed, other similar unions have begun to come together in different places. The most advanced of these is the South Street Workers (IWW) in Philadelphia. Comparable to Montpelier, NEFAC members are playing an important role in the forming of this union. What makes the South Street Workers significant is the fact that they are demonstrating that such a model is possible in a large urban setting. Recently, workers in Madison, Wisconsin have contacted the MDWU and have informed us that they too are preparing to build a similar geographic union. NEFAC members in Montreal have also been discussing forming a Precarious Workers' Union in that city. As more and more of these democratic, geographic unions form, it will be increasingly important that we keep the dialogue open. We must never forget that it is imperative to not only learn from each other's victories, but also our mistakes. Together we have the potential to transform the future.

The formation of such unions should not be understood as an end in itself. Rather, it is one step down the road of delivering an overall directly democratic, socialist society. First we must create a forum where workers can empower themselves. Starting a union for those that labor in small shops, such as the Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union, is a necessary step in that direction. Inevitably, such organizations begin by seeking bread and butter victories for their constituencies, thereby proving their power and raising the expectations of those workers it uplifts. It is reasonable to expect that such unions will begin to branch out and take on broader social issues such as the establishment of universal healthcare and an ending of imperialist war.

In addition to building these organizations, we must seek ways of bringing the rank and file members of the different unions together, geographically, in directly democratic bodies. As a prelude, we must foster an overall sense of class unity and common cause between the different trades and sectors. In Montpelier, where many sectors are already organized into unions, we see this potentially beginning through the formation of the Workers' Defense Squad. Eventually, as the struggle continues, we must not settle for merely the creation of working class organizations which tackle the *symptoms* of capitalism, but we must create larger democratic bodies of workers who are ready and willing to establish a *dual power* that is fundamentally at odds with the forces of capital; we must establish local *Workers' Councils*.

Such worker organizations, along with democratic community organizations such as Town Meeting and Tenants' Unions, are the seeds of

said dual power. It will only be when the workers, farmers and communities are organized and prepared to fight for their collective self interest (housing, healthcare, childcare, job security, livable wages, etc.) that socialism and democracy will have the practical means through which to overcome capitalism. The establishment of the Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union is one small step in that direction.

## The Role of Anarchists

From the start of the campaign to the present, members of NEFAC-Vermont and other anarchists have been involved. Early on, NEFAC had one worker on the Organizing Committee. Currently, there are four NEFAC members and supporters on the Stewards' Committee and two additional member/supporters also in the union. It should be recognized that of those NEFAC members and supporters, only four were in the organization before they became union members. The others have recently become involved, in large part, because the basic goals and principles of NEFAC (direct democracy, socialism, class struggle, etc.) dovetail, to a certain extent, with those that are emerging organically within the union. With this being said, one should not make the mistake of believing that this is an anarchist lead union. What small number of anarchists that have been involved have done so through their capacities as workers first, and anything else second. Further, the vast majority of union members would not consciously identify themselves politically as anarchists. However, Vermonters have a strong tendency towards direct democracy. This tendency is influenced by their tradition of Town Meeting. As this tradition intersects with the contemporary class struggle, it has the potential to evolve into a movement which will seek the eventual transformation of society into something resembling a form of libertarian socialism. Of course, it should not be expected that this potential trajectory will reach maturity tomorrow.

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NEFAC-Vermont as an independent organization has sought, at times, to consciously inject the larger picture of the class struggle and the logical socialist conclusions of direct democracy into the union movement. Early on, NEFAC-Vermont wrote and distributed to hundreds of Montpelier workers the brief pamphlet "Union + Town Meeting = Democracy" [10]. In this work we endorsed the call for the Downtown Workers' Union, and discussed how such an organization could be a first step in achieving economic and democratic freedom. We have also given the union drive significant exposure and analysis in our seasonal statewide newspaper, Catamount Tavern News. Finally, we have sought to act as the watchdogs of internal democracy whenever such issues arise.

As we are all ourselves workers, we lent whatever hand we could. If we were employed outside the scope of the union, we contributed to the cause with vigor. If we labored in the city, we joined

the union and did our duty as working class revolutionaries to strengthen the movement. We have walked side by side with our fellow workers prioritizing the building of this democratic union first and our ideology second. As anarchists, we understand that it will be the workers themselves, who must and will eventually lead the movement and, one day, the revolution. What they call themselves (be it anarchist, progressive, or socialist) will matter not if they remain committed to establishing meaningful forms of democracy that result in a community where the scarecrows of poverty are replaced with bounties of plenty. Here, in this northern state capital, surrounded by the wooded mountains and mindful of the tradition of the Green Mountain Boys, workers are taking the first steps in reclaiming a democracy which has been obscured by 200 years of capitalism. One has to start somewhere and, today, that somewhere is Montpelier.

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## Notes

[1] As late as World War II, the U.S. Department of Defense listed Springfield, Vermont, as one of the most likely places Nazi Germany would bomb, if and when it had the opportunity, because of the massive industrial output from its machine shops.

[2] While the former Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation is now increasingly the topic of books, pamphlets, and articles, it is ironic that one of its two most lasting and effective legacies (The Vermont Workers' Center - the other being the building of the Anti-Racist Action network) receives little to no attention. Unfortunately writers have tended to make the less dynamic story of its internal ideological conflicts the main strain of the often-told narrative.

[3] See the Northeastern Anarchist #8, *Class Struggle In The Green Mountains*, by Lady (NEFAC-Vermont).

[4] Unfortunately this did not pan out. Other than a couple union members who helped create a preliminary demographic map of downtown shops (how many workers, what the starting and average pay is, etc.), and a couple more who eventually had limited involvement on the Community Solidarity Committee, the coop workers offered little concrete support to the project. Today one coop worker serves on the Workers' Defense Squad.

[5] This is not to imply that this strategy should be employed at all times and in all places. For example, if recognition were being sought at a corporate chain store, it is unlikely that such could be had without one of these elections. It is conceivable that the MDWU can and will choose to go such a legalistic route when and if they gain union majorities at such shops, or whenever circumstances demand.

[6] The union was able to claim victory with the settlement. Management had to post notices that they would not interfere with union activity, and all the union members who were screwed by management were awarded relatively large sums of money.

[7] This committee is empowered to carry out the general directives of the membership, and itself operates according to an internal democratic process.

[8] This shop has a strong union majority. Management has agreed to a 'community election', which will be held in the coming weeks.

[9] Every NEFAC-Vermont member and supporter is working class. Furthermore, The Green Mountain Anarchist Collective only allows working class folk to become members.

[10] See Catamount Tavern News, Fall 2003.

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**David** works in a bakery where he is a proud rank-and-file member of the Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union. He is currently serving on the union's 'Stewards' Committee'. David is also a member of the National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981 (AFL-CIO), and the Green Mountain Anarchist Collective (NEFAC-Vermont).

# OPERATION SOLID OUT II

## The Failed General Strike in British Columbia

by Paul Finch

The failed province-wide "General Strike" movement in late April and early May of 2004 marked the most significant period of labor unrest in British Columbia since 1983. During this period, dissatisfaction with government policies and ensuing legislation escalated into wildcat strikes, walkouts, and significant mass public support for the actions of labor unions, community groups, and students in opposition to the government.

Very little has been written on the attempted general strike from the perspective of those in British Columbia, and even less from those who were actually involved in the actions that took place around May Day of 2004. The lack of critical theory and analysis of what happened is unacceptable in light of the current situation, and the challenges faced not just by working people throughout the province, but also across the country. Without a thorough understanding of how the general strike movement operated, and how it failed, the labor movement in British Columbia will be sentenced to continual failure and decline. Even worse, it would be a tragedy if the Quebec workers, who even now are wrestling with the neo-liberal reforms of the Charest Liberal regime, were not to draw solid lessons from the general strike movement.

This critical account of the failed general strike movement in British Columbia is written from an anarchist perspective within the events, as both a participant and observer. It is firmly rooted not only in experience of the events at their epicenter in Victoria, but also from the perspective of an anarchist-communist and student union organizer involved in labor and community struggles. It is therefore necessary that the content of this account focus on the events in Victoria, the most central area, both because it is the provincial seat of governance, and because the city experienced the sharpest expression of class conflict.

### Background to the Events

British Columbia has traditionally held one of the strongest labor movements in North America. Many US trade unions found their origins in the Pacific west above their borders, the Industrial Workers of the World established a stronghold there prior to their suppression following the first World War, and the solidly resource-based economy has long been a bastion of unionism, in both the public and private sectors. Although these

foundations have continually been eroded, their legacy still remains in the unique manifestations of the labor movement today.

It was during the late reign of the conservative Social Credit government, prior to the accession to power of the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), that the labor movement found expression in the 1983 "Operation Solidarity" movement. The culmination of radical organizing throughout the late 60's and 70's, Operation Solidarity saw labor, community, environmental, and radical militants attempt a general strike to force the hand of the provincial government. This was the first crucial battle between the introduction of neo-liberal privatization, and a labor movement divided between reformism and radical opposition. Operation Solidarity later earned the title "Operation



### UNIONS PROMISE 'NIGHTMARE' FOR B.C. ON MONDAY

CLUPE leader says 'B.C. will be closed for business on Monday' promises 'an absolute nightmare' Teachers to shut down every public school in B.C., maybe for more than one day, BCTF chief says

SkyTrains, Coast Mountain buses, SeaBuses and West Van Blue buses fully out of service Monday. TransLink

Sold Out", as the powerful anti-communist labor bureaucracy ceded into a deal with the government on unfavorable terms, ending the mass labor dispute.

With the fall of the NDP in the election of 2001, in which it lost all but two of the seventy-nine electoral seats up for contest, a radically right-wing regime under the BC Liberals took power provincially. The effects were immediate and striking. Where the NDP has eroded the foundations of the welfare state and enacted policies aimed at privatization and liberalization of industry, the BC Liberals outright crippled and destroyed the social order that had existed during the previous social democratic government. The terms of labor contracts concluded by mutual parties were openly altered by legislation, unions who expressed contempt through labor action were legislated back to work, and social welfare services were slashed as massive tax cuts for the wealthiest citizens came hand in hand with the privatization of public assets.

In January of 2002, the provincial government introduced legislation specifically aimed at provoking the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) into open conflict, and at breaking

the Hospital Employees Union (HEU). The legislation "renegotiated" existing contracts into unilateral documents based solely upon the will and discretion of the government. Other unions, such as the British Columbia Government Employees Union (BCGEU), faced massive wage and benefit cuts in addition to the layoffs experienced as a result of broad public-sector privatization. In all cases, the leadership of the unions ceded to government demands without a fight, relying primarily on mass one-off publicity demonstrations of public displeasure.

It was in this climate of social tension and defeatism amongst the union bureaucracy that substantial radical elements began to take more definite form and express themselves popularly. During large anti-government demonstrations, anarchists began to distribute literature and carry banners calling for a general strike, demanding measures aimed at rolling back the provincial government's policies. Community coalitions that served as alliances between labor and community militants were formed, often as small directorships unaccountable to broader external or internal social forces, to carry out social agitation that the British Columbia Federation of Labor (BCFed) refused to sanction. Consistent polarization within the people's opposition to the government ensued as the BCFed and affiliates adopted a position of waiting for the upcoming provincial elections to alter government policies through the election of a social democratic alternative. Recalling the openly neo-liberal policies of the prior social democratic government, radicals broadly rejected the NDP and BCFed's line and continued to push for a general strike movement.

### The Events of April and May

The provincial government decided to launch an intensified attack on the HEU early in 2004, announcing privatization of over 1,000 positions on Vancouver Island alone. The largest private sector union in the province, the Industrial, Wood and Allied Workers of America (IWA), backed up the privatization schemes by unionizing the employees hired by companies who were recipients of the privatization contracts. With no legal recourse, since the "new" workers (in reality, primarily the old employees forced to take the same jobs at lower pay and benefits) were covered by labor law as belonging to the IWA, over 10,000 HEU workers were about to or had already lost their jobs.

On February 23rd, the Communities Solidarity Coalition of Victoria (CSC) supported a wildcat strike action by many of the HEU workers whose jobs were slated to be privatized. Student union militants played a sizable role in supporting the wildcat. The CSC, which had previously focused on mass demonstrations and social actions, now focused itself on supporting HEU workers who were under attack. The CSC itself was at the time a loose coalition of labor, student, and community activists led by a small group of organizers.

The health employers, backed by the provincial government, took an aggressive position in ensuing contract negotiations with the HEU. They demanded severe cuts in benefits and pay that were rejected outright by the HEU's membership. The result was that in April, contract negotiations failed, and on Monday, April 26th the HEU went on strike at approximately 340 care facilities around the province. The union took a steadfast position in maintaining essential service levels at all health care facilities, allowing for required treatments to continue and necessary shifts to be staffed by its membership.

The government's response was swift, and after just two days into the strike, they crafted Bill 37 to legislate the HEU workers back to work. In addition to ordering strikers back to work, the leg-

islation fixed a contract for the union that allowed for open-ended privatization, and imposed a 15% wage cut retroactive to April 1st. Supporters of the HEU rallied to the picket lines in indignation, and labor and community activists began to encourage wildcat pickets in support of the striking workers, urging the union not to give in to the government's position.

The labor movement was deeply divided on the legislation: while all opposed it, some prominent unions and labor leaders refused to support the HEU. Jim Sinclair, president of the BCFed, held back from advising labor unions to join the HEU on the picket lines, and the head of the BCGEU did likewise. During the morning of Thursday April 29th, before Bill 37 had been given royal assent and passed into law, shop stewards for the BC Nurses Union (BCNU) and Health Employees Association (HEA, a loose BCGEU affiliate) were ordering their members to cross HEU picket lines. The HEU executive itself didn't issue a decision on the government's ruling until over a full five hours after it had been made law, eventually declaring they would continue the strike in defiance of the government.

The decision by the HEU, under strong pressure from its members, to defy the government's back to work legislation was both a controversial and popular one. While many unions such as the BCGEU and BCNU distanced themselves from the HEU and ordered members to cross picket lines, workers across British Columbia began to decide otherwise. Over 100 BC Hydro workers in Prince George and Revelstoke went on a wildcat strike, shutting down the three largest hydroelectric dams in the province. Several union locals across the province followed suit and went on strike in support of healthcare workers, and HEU picket lines were flooded with supporters from the community and other labor unions. Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) locals started repeating the call for the general strike, by this time a common slogan, and the BC Teacher's Federation (BCTF) declared their members would respect any and all CUPE picket lines around public schools.

The morning of Friday, April 30th started with a bold action by the CSC, pre-empting a labor board ruling deeming the strike illegal. Leading militants from the BCGEU, CUPE, HEU, and student unions staged a flying picket of the Victoria Swartz Bay BC Ferries terminal, effectively shutting down the main conduit of travel between Vancouver Island—the capital of the province being located on the Island—and the mainland between 5:30am and 7:20am, disrupting sailings for the rest of the day. Although the action itself was minor, the BC Ferry workers enthusiastically supported the picket lines, and news of a flying picket shutting down a crucial transport corridor spread quickly throughout the province.

Throughout Friday, union locals across the province continued to wildcat in support of the defiant HEU workers. In Victoria, almost every CUPE local went out in support of the HEU, with the exception of the University workers. Largely, CUPE workers were enacting an "Action Plan" of cascading strikes should any of its subsidiary locals be targeted. While HEU wasn't affiliated with CUPE provincially, it was nationally, and therefore many individual locals interpreted the "Action Plan" liberally and enacted solidarity strikes. CUPE's leadership, which hadn't yet issued a strong position on the strikes, came out in support of them and announced that all of the union's 70,000 workers in the province would be out on the picket lines by Monday at the latest.

The BCFed, meanwhile, had scheduled a meeting with the government's Labor Minister. The talks were short, with the BCFed pulling out quickly to caucus internally. The rest of the day was consumed by internal meetings of the BCFed, where the organiza-

tion secretly decided not to authorize a general strike, the executive voting against the measure by a small but safe margin. The BCFed's decision was impacted by a serious problem: the general strike movement which was building steam had not been initiated or planned by the organization itself and their leadership was clearly in the passenger seat. Over 800 BC Hydro workers joined their brothers and sisters on the picket line, and all across the province the movement for a general strike was gaining momentum.

Saturday was May 1st, International Workers' Day. Demonstrations in commemoration of the eight-hour-day struggle and international labor solidarity flared around the globe, as they do every year on that day. In Victoria, over a thousand striking workers and militants took to the streets, periodically interrupting speakers with chants of "General Strike now!" and marching directly to picket lines in support of striking HEU workers. Thousands of leaflets denouncing the government and distributing demands were issued under the banner of the Federation of Northwest Anarchist-Communists (FNAC). The leaflets, the only broad propaganda issued during the May Day demonstrations, featured common demands such as repealing back to work legislation and calling for a general strike. In population-dense Vancouver, a hastily put together May Day demonstration attracted over ten thousand marching in support of the general strike movement.

Labor unrest around the province increased. More and more unions continued to wildcat, in a seemingly endless cascade. Over 24,000 students were unable to attend the schools which had been shut down by CUPE pickets, and flying squads in Victoria picketed several sympathetic union locals. The provincial government was appealing for unions to "respect the rule of law" and continued to seek a court injunction against the strike, which had been deemed illegal. In addition, plans were set into motion to conduct mass arrests, and holding facilities were emptied in expectation of striking workers being rounded up. It was in this climate that the BCFed, still reeling from its membership rejecting appeasement tactics, decided to convene further negotiations with the government.

The expected "calm before the storm" arrived on Sunday, May 2nd, after a series of May Day demonstrations that had buoyed striking workers and left the government and BCFed alienated from the events taking place. Provincial courts declared the HEU strike illegal, and leveled severe fines against the union in excess of \$400,000 a day. Despite the stiff penalties, the HEU stood firm and refused to remove its picket lines. The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) had by this time served strike notice, threatening to take down large sectors of commercial food distribution services. Private sector unions, including progressive locals of the IWA, announced they would walk out on Monday. Transit workers across the province also stated their intentions to go on strike in support of the HEU.

The BCFed sought to regain composure and announced to leading labor and community militants a plan of action for the anticipated province-wide general strike on Monday, refusing to acknowledge the fact that the organization's executive had already decided against calling a general strike. In Victoria, a meeting was arranged between local BCFed affiliates and local militants, primarily from the CSC, outlining which locals could and could not be picketed down on Monday. Meanwhile, closed door negotiations between the government and labor leaders continued.

By Sunday night the CSC had grouped labor and community militants together in Victoria for a planning session to work out details of the following day's activity. The session quickly began to

unravel as news reports of an agreement reached by the highest echelons of organized labor had been accepted. The BCFed, it appeared, was using its chain of command to dismantle preparations before negotiations with the government had produced any results. It appeared to all observers that the BCFed had no intention of allowing its affiliate membership to strike, a suspicion that was confirmed with the cessation of approval for the CSC in Victoria to cross-picket an extensive list of sympathetic work sites.

After 10pm, news of the sellout by labor leadership was announced: a deal had been reached between the HEU management and the government, brokered by the heads of the BCFed and BCGEU. CUPE quickly ordered its membership to stand down, and the BCTF followed suit, along with the other public and private sector unions. Amongst the general confusion of the ensuing series of pronouncements by labor leaders, HEU workers at locals across the province denounced their executive, openly accusing the leadership of "selling out". Indeed, the "deal" negotiated with the government merely reduced pay cuts to 10% while adding 2.5 hours to the work week, limiting privatization of positions to "only" an additional three hundred. Visibly defiant, HEU workers across the province announced to live television crews their intention to stay on the picket line, and pickets were quickly erected around HEU headquarters by an unsatisfied membership.

The morning of Monday, May 3rd saw HEU pickets remain steadfast at the major health care facilities across the province. In Victoria, over 400 FNAC posters were plastered across the city demanding the repeal of Bill 37 and cessation of privatization of public services and assets. Flying pickets shut down transit services, and CSC flying squads were centrally coordinated around the city. In Nanaimo and Quesnel, labor unrest continued throughout the day. Despite this strong show of forces on Vancouver Island, the mainland remained relatively quiet. Business as usual resumed in Vancouver, where no CSC-like group was able to coordinate cross pickets or flying squads, and the labor movement obeyed the back-to-work orders. Even in Victoria, it was clear by the end of the day that the general strike movement had been crushed. The unions had backed down, some publicly denouncing the deal with the government, others sheepishly claiming it as a "victory". The HEU, betrayed by its own leadership, soon caved and found itself engaged in pitted internal battles. The general strike movement was, for all intents and purposes, over.

### Analysis of the April and May Events

It is exceedingly difficult to arrive at a coherent, systemic analysis of the failed general strike movement in British Columbia. There is an intersection between reality and ideological interpretation that blurs lines and leads to false motivations being ascribed to various parties. The tendency to describe complex socio-economic forces in simple, dogmatic stereotypes is all too common amongst the revolutionary left. In much of the material that has already been published, "big labor" is accused of selling out "the rank and file," without any further exploration of the issue or clarification of what those two terms really mean. Rather than using facts to justify an ideological explanation of the situation, the following analysis of the general strike movement attempts to use ideological conventions to illuminate the currents of factual understanding.

First and foremost, the single greatest reason for the failure of the general strike movement was a lack of organization. The most glaring, obvious deficiency in the way in which the rolling wildcat strikes were conducted was the fact that the various locals going

on strike were rarely in communication with one another. Since the structures of the formal labor movement across the province were unable to provide leadership or coordination, labor and community militants were left to their own devices, along with whatever smaller coalitions they had formed in the previous months of struggle. This level of organization was, by itself, insufficient to coordinate and provide leadership for the broad elements calling for a general strike.

There were no common organizations in which labor and community militants could come together to confide in one another in a time of crisis. The leadership that arose throughout the April and May events was accountable in a very loose way in several instances, and completely unaccountable in several more. The groups of militants who could, and should, have been issuing demands and organizing increased strike action were paralyzed by inaction, and found themselves swept up in the events that unfolded before them. When the need for greater organization became apparent, it was already too late.

There is a continual tendency among radicals to create social movements that are inherited by reformists, and either crushed entirely or used for the ends of the latter. This is precisely the case with the general strike movement. The loss of these movements to reformist elements is never intentional, nor is it the result of indecisive elements within the radical tendencies; rather, it is the natural result of radicals not being engaged in specific political organizations. The CSC is a perfect example of this: while many of its leading militants identified with revolutionary traditions, including anarchism, few of them were engaged in any specific political organizations. The task of building a culture of resistance among common radicals was ignored in favor of exclusive work on mass political formations, brought together around a simple basis of unity.

Nowhere in the province was a single political organization or alliance of organizations able to broadly influence the course of events, with the result that a series of competing organizations exercised slight influence over small factions within the broader movement. The movement itself, based on a loose notion of defending the HEU by wielding the tool of a general strike, was unable to shift tactically or even strategically. While militants had, through their agitation, shaped the desire for a general strike and brought it to the forefront of public consciousness, they had simultaneously failed to create organizations that could ensure the practical application of the principles from which the desire for a general strike stemmed.

The membership of several local unions after the fact would complain that because of a lack of organization, and as a result a lack of communication, they were unaware of the extent of resistance to the BCFed-brokered "deal". They contended that, had they only been informed of the ongoing resistance and its depth, they would have rallied harder around the need to continue the strike. The lack of counter-structures to spread information allowed for the default organizational structures of the BCFed and affiliate unions to take over processes that had, for the duration of the General Strike movement, been suspended by the self-activity of the strikers and their nominally militant leadership.

The role of flying squads was critical in shaping the character and direction of the strike movement. In many union locals, there exists a tension between the reformist and more radical elements. Flying squads allowed the radical elements to unite and draw out the reformist elements with them, by changing the dynamic from "should we walk out?" to "should we respect an existing picket line preventing us from going to work?" While a "yes" to the former question was often indefensible in the face of strong reformist control of a local, a "yes" to the latter was resisted by only the most conservative elements.

## The Need For Theoretical and Organizational Development

The main lesson that can be drawn from the failure of the General Strike movement in BC is the need for a coherent revolutionary organization with a solid theoretical and practical base. It is the practical base of an organization, and the connection of its membership to the struggles they are attempting to influence, that form the ability of the aforementioned theoretical analysis to permeate and gain popularity among existing militants (while in its propagation awakening new ones).

If the revolutionary anarchist-communist movement is to learn anything from the failure of the General Strike movement in BC, it should be the need for solid theoretical analysis that lays out the path before those involved in agitation, and provides a common basis for militants from all ideological tendencies to unite under. Agitation in a given area of struggle - be it based in the community, industrial, or service sectors - by itself does not produce the required level of communication and organization to build a movement that can truly make itself independent from the reformist structures it arises within. The level of organization needs to come from militants grouped together around a common analysis of the situation, who work out their respective ideological positions on the basis of the analysis being put forward.

Concretely, in any future general strike situation in BC or Quebec, the immediate task of a revolutionary organization can be characterized in three main areas. The first is to carry out broad and systematic propaganda campaigns on behalf of the labor agitation, which FNAC did during the BC movement. The second is to form a theoretical analysis of the situation, to provide a vision of where the movement should go based on that analysis, and to propagate both the vision and analysis broadly throughout the movement. The third area of intervention is to develop and raise existing organs of struggle to an appropriate level where they do exist, and to build and maintain them where they do not. Integral to this process is identifying a community organization which can be developed to serve as a conduit for communication between existing labor unions, and facilitating meeting between the leadership from various community groups and labor unions that emerges, organically, over the course of struggle.

During the general strike movement in BC, no revolutionary organization was able to characterize the events taking place and make demands based on them, save for ancillary propaganda produced by FNAC in the course of struggle. In the absence of a revolutionary organization carrying out intervention in all three of the main areas listed previously, striking workers and those supporting them had little alternative but to fall back on the political and labor organizations that were already familiar to them. Due to the failure of revolutionaries to provide accountable leadership based on articulating a shared vision and demands, the workers in struggle were forced to turn to an unaccountable leadership, which based its power on existing institutions and structures. It is essential for anarchist-communists to put forward accountable and revolutionary leadership based on a common analysis and direction put forward by militants and endorsed by those involved in the struggle.

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# Back to the Roots

## Anarchists as Revolutionary Organizers

by Ian Martin

What needs to be done to create a successful, truly liberatory, revolutionary movement? What should an anarchist be doing to help in the creation and construction of such a movement? These are central questions that anarchists need to be addressing. While they are by no means the only relevant issues, the fact that some anarchists spend so much time on intellectual masturbation instead of tackling these concrete problems of liberation is symptomatic of their distance from real grassroots struggle.

For some, anarchism may be an intellectual game, a lifestyle, or simply something to do to pass the time. But for anyone who is truly interested in liberation, in building a free, equal and just society made up of vibrant communities, its time to get our hands dirty. There's no substitute or quick fix for organizing and movement-building. Behind every "spontaneous" uprising or revolution, there was years of organizing work that paved the way and laid the foundations. Such work has been ignored for far too long by those calling themselves anarchists. This distance from grassroots struggle must be eliminated, and anarchists must assume their proper role as revolutionary organizers if they wish to be at all successful in seeing their dreams realized. The reason why anarchists are so cut off and isolated from the people and find themselves sharing in so many of the other flaws of the Left, is because like the Left, anarchists have mostly (in modern times) been activists.

### Activists and Organizers

What's the difference between an activist and an organizer? The distinction is quite important. An activist is committed and responsible to an issue; they are what I call "issue-centered." The issue can be anything from war to globalization to anarchism itself. Activists then attempt to rally people around this issue based on individuals' moral commitments and beliefs. For activists, an organization is simply a means to effect change and win some victories regarding the given issue.

An organizer, by contrast, is committed and responsible to a defined constituency. Or in other words, is responsible to a group of people (students, workers at a workplace, etc.) or a community. Organizers are what I call "people-centered." Rather than rally people around some issue, an organizer believes that the important thing is to build relationships between people and transform power dynamics, letting issues be defined by the people them-



selves. For an organizer, building people's collective power to create change is ultimately more important than victory on an issue. Issues are important insofar as they are a means of building this collective power, radicalizing people, and constructing a movement and organizations.

### Activism: Isolated and Impotent

It can quickly be seen why activism leads to alienation and isolation from "ordinary" people, and ineffectiveness in bringing about real, revolutionary change. Activists spend their time producing analysis concerning different issues, and then expect people to come flocking to that analysis that was produced by activists in isolation. This process does not allow people to craft their own analysis or select their own issues. Activism is based around a deep lack of trust in people, and an unwillingness to give control to the "masses," who are valuable as bodies in a march but not as participants in theory or guiding a movement. Given this fact, it then becomes a bit absurd when activists start asking, "Where are the people of color?" or "How come only white lefties ever participate?" Should they be surprised when their lack of trust is returned by those they disdain?

No genuine revolution can be built from a strategic model that values an issue above people, and utilizes people as simply a means to an end (shouldn't anarchism be about putting people as the end?). Anarchists have become activists by default over the years, due to a lack of clear organization and concrete goals. This needs to change. Organizers have a fundamental faith and trust in people and their potential, and thus allow them to take part in and guide analysis and issue-selection. Many so-called radicals seem to fear that "ordinary people" will make mistakes if given this control. But what is anarchism if not the belief that people are fully able to govern themselves and make the decisions that affect their lives? Certainly our ability to do so is stunted by living in a hierarchical, authoritarian society, but how else will this capacity develop

and how else will people learn but through mistakes? Vanguardism is not just a strategy but also a state of mind that thinks that there is a group of enlightened radicals, and everyone else isn't quite at their level yet, so the "ordinary folk" can't be given control. This mindset must be wiped out, especially from the brains of those who claim to be anarchists.

Letting people define their own issues is key to an organizer. People will obviously be far more committed to fighting for an issue and goal that they have selected through a collective, organic process than one that was chosen for them and they are expected to run to, shouting "Hallelujah, I've seen the light!" An organizer should work to build people's skills and experience in analysis, not control the analysis itself. Organizers should facilitate analysis by making sure that a process of dialogue, where people talk out their feelings and insights about an issue, and research takes place, with a solid position and strategy ultimately being formulated. As sure as the sun will shine, people will at times choose to work for reforms, which sets off the vanguardist tendency in many radicals. But an organizer knows that it's not the end of the world, and in fact is quite natural.

The best way for someone to learn the futility of reformism is often not by being lectured, but by experiencing it for his or herself in the course of struggle. Radicalization is rarely a divine revelation; rather reform struggles can often be key elements in the process. Organizers facilitate and encourage the action people have chosen, knowing that any action is useful as long as there is reflection.

Truly useful and radical theory develops from such action and reflection, not clever thoughts in an ivory tower. An organizer is ultimately concerned with transforming power dynamics, and this can often be accomplished just as well in working towards a reform as a more radical goal.

It is also important to remember that historically the people have been the most radical element in revolutionary moments. It is the activists, intellectuals, and party leaders, who are always claiming to have the monopoly on militancy and advanced ideas, who end up exerting a conservative influence when it matters most. A true anarchist and revolutionary organizer wants to develop and unleash the revolutionary potency in people, and when its day has come will let it wash away the old order without straining to put a leash on it in the name of party, ideology, or personal power.

### Power Dynamics

Organizers are primarily concerned with transforming power dynamics, but in what way? Currently, much of society is based on an unequal power dynamic of hierarchy and top-down rule. Anarchists and revolutionary organizers should be focused on changing this power dynamic wherever it occurs. Power is not necessarily a bad thing; it is simply the ability to effect change and have a say in decision-making. What is bad is when power is distributed unequally, when it is given to some and not to others. But fortunately power, unlike money, does grow on trees, or more precisely is present within each of us as human beings. How power is distributed in society is a social relationship, and like any social relationship, can be transformed once the people involved commit themselves to changing it.

While power is currently concentrated in the hands of a few, organizers work to change the situation into one in which power is distributed evenly. What this means in concrete terms is that right now only a minority in society get to make the decisions about how

society will operate, and also monopolize the means to enforce those decisions. Instead, anarchists wish to see everyone have an equal say in the decisions that affect their communities. Decisions will be made reality by the people themselves, not imposed on them by coercive methods.

Organizers are not only concerned with developing people's power, but also their creativity and initiative. In other words, while all revolutions and movements depend to some degree on popular empowerment, often times this is only so that it can be directed into the channels which leaders and would-be leaders have devised. Anarchist organizers rightly view this as manipulation and inimical to freedom. With equal and collective power for all should come the equal opportunity of all to decide how their power will be exercised.



ism and hierachal society, and to give people a taste of a different world, a taste which will hopefully bloom into a burning thirst. Just as people have been convinced that they can't stand up to the system and make a change, they have also been convinced that this way of life is as good as humanity gets and there is no alternative. We have been bred to believe the worst about each other and humankind in general, and experiments in positive power can show people that cooperation, justice, equality, and solidarity can come as naturally and easily to us as competition, selfishness and brutality does to us under the current system. Once confidence, experience, and belief/desire in a better world have been developed, people can wield positive power to move beyond limited programs to the complete collective management of social, political, and economic life.

The aim of organizers is to help develop both the positive and negative power of the people. A revolutionary anarchist organizer does not control people power; rather he or she merely tries to work for situations and structures that develop it. How that power is used is up to the people themselves.

### Towards the Social Revolution

Dual power is an important concept for organizers and anarchists to understand. It refers to a state of affairs in which popular power, in both its positive and negative forms, poses a direct challenge to the State and threatens to replace it as the accepted power in society. When free, cooperative institutions are created

by the people to take over the political, economic, and/or social organization of life, the new society is being created "within the shell of the old." However, while this positive construction is absolutely integral to revolution, it cannot be successful without tactics based on negative power.

The State will not just peacefully relinquish power to the free institutions of the people. Rather, those in power will try their best to destroy them using whatever coercion and force is necessary. This is because institutions of dual power are direct challenges to the legitimacy of the State. A situation where two social forms compete for legitimacy is inherently unstable, one or the other must prevail eventually. Negative power is thus essential to defend the people's institutions against State attacks, as well as to take the offensive and dismantle the State.

Some see social revolution as an outdated concept that is rendered impossible and unrealistic in this modern world of high-tech weaponry and a U.S. military that is the most powerful war-making machine the world has ever known. This, however, demonstrates a lack of understanding as to what social revolution really is. It is not a political revolution where leaders and factions compete for authority or a guerilla struggle with a small band fighting against Goliath. Rather, it is the people as a whole rising up to create new societal forms and to destroy the old ones. It can be seen as a zero-sum game where an increase in people power leads to a decrease in State and elite power.

Once a certain point has been reached, people power is at such a high level that State and elite power is reduced to a weak semblance of its old self. This is because it must always be remembered, and it seems that some have forgot, that the economic, political, and social power of the ruling class is based on controlling and commanding people's power. When people begin to seize control of their own power and use it for their own purposes, not only does this become fuel for the fire of revolution, but it also means that this power is lost by the ruling class and means a reduction in their power. The case for social revolution in modern society is thus not as hopeless as it first seems, for the withdrawal of people's power from the system does more damage to State and capitalist power than any street fighting could ever do. There will of course be some fighting and violence, but the more organized the people are and the more people seize control of their own power, the weaker the ruling class will be without firing a single bullet.

## Organizing Theory

Organizations are, at heart, a network of relationships between people. It is important never to forget this, and that organizations are created to serve the needs of people, not vice versa. That being said, organizations are necessary and important. They are the means by which people can wield collective power. Power must be wielded collectively, not only because it is otherwise impossible to achieve social change, but because collective power will be the basis of the new society. One key thing must be said and I cannot stress this enough: the ultimate goal of an organizer is to make everyone into an organizer. One's skills, insights, and knowledge should not be jealously guarded but rather shared as widely as possible.

That being said, what are the main tasks facing an organizer when helping in the construction of an organization?

### 1) Build Relationships

Relationships between the people inside them are what make or break effective revolutionary organizations. Ultimately, a network of relationships or collection of people forms the initial foundation of an organization. Sometimes this group comes together organically on its own, and at other times it is the work of active outreach by organizers. Such outreach can be in the form of one-on-one conversations, group forums, or other means. Often times organizations also come about as the result of a single-issue campaign when a core group of people working on such a campaign come together to create something more broad and lasting.

Whatever the case may be, it is the responsibility of organizers and everyone in an organization to make sure that all relationships are healthy and based on principles of equality and solidarity. Feelings of camaraderie and cooperation often develop naturally as a result of shared work, but it is also important to create a culture of friendship. This culture can come about if people have fun together and share in social activities that are not necessarily even related to what the organization does. When new people enter the organization, the utmost effort must be made to integrate them into the network of relationships, so that cliques of old, experienced members separate from new members do not develop. If people are not engaged and feel a disconnect from everyone else, they will likely not stay around for long.

### 2) Organize Relationships into a Structured Form

Structure is vitally important for all organizations. While a good organization may be made up of people who feel a kinship to each other and even people who are all committed to lofty revolutionary principles, informal hierarchies still can and will develop without structure. It is easy to be turned off to the concept of structure when we live in a society based on authoritarian, hierachal structures that strangle freedom and participation, and when endless, frustrating bureaucracy is everywhere. But just because structure takes on such vile forms in our current society does not mean we should throw out the baby with the bathwater. If used in the right way, structure can actually be a means of ensuring democracy, equal power and participation. The absence of structure and order does not necessarily lead to freedom or equality. Certain members of our society possess privileges based on race, class, gender, or personality. Without any structure, these privileges manifest themselves and an informal, ranked hierarchy based upon them emerges. Those with privilege dominate discussion and decision-making, while those without it feel disenfranchised and intimidated.

Democracy is not just about everyone having a vote, but about everyone having an equal part in the discussion leading up to a vote, the information needed to make it, and the opportunity and ability to voice their opinion on the issue. Those who argue against structure ignore the fact that the process upon which "structureless" groups operate is the organizational equivalent of the theory of laissez-faire capitalism: everyone in capitalism has the opportunity to get rich, so if they don't then it's their own fault. Of course we all know that this is complete nonsense and that success in capitalism is almost always determined by privilege (whether based on class, race, gender, etc.).

Similarly, some argue that groups without structure are also "level playing fields" and that if people do not speak up or participate it is their own fault (personal responsibility). Anarchists and revolutionar-

ies should know better. The group is collectively responsible for ensuring the equal participation of all its members, while personal responsibility is a concept that we should discard, as it has always been the justification for inequity. Organizers should help in building a non-hierarchical, democratic structure that defends against the emergence of any type of hierarchy or elite, whether formal or informal. Such a structure should accomplish the following things:

*Create accountability:* It is vitally important that tasks are formally assigned and divided up. If they are not, tasks will end up falling to the same people over and over again, which is unhealthy because not only will those people end up monopolizing experience and skills, but the work of the organization ends up being performed by only a few, which is a recipe for elitism.

Additionally, assigning tasks has the benefit of creating accountability. If no one is really responsible for a certain task, then there is no way of insuring that it gets done. But if there is someone responsible, then there is a definite sense of accountability which will ensure that most things do get done, and at the least that there is someone to question if he or she does not follow-through on the assigned task. Accountability is not a trespass against individual freedom. Tasks should be assigned on a volunteer basis, so that one freely chooses to be accountable when taking something on. While individual freedom is a high priority for anarchists, so is the collective responsibility that goes with it. In other words, there is a responsibility to the people that you work with when participating in an organization.

*Build leadership and empower people:* It is important that organizations empower and develop the leadership abilities of each of their members. While anarchists are against permanent leaders with vested authority over others, it is important for us in our organizing to acknowledge the fact that "leaders" and "leadership" of a different type do exist in organizations and revolutionary movements, and that this is a natural and not necessarily negative phenomena. Leadership is not harmful as long as the right structure is in place to ensure that the leadership skills of everyone are developed and that everyone is a leader at some point and in some capacity. When everyone is a leader, has power, and is an agent of change, then anarchism is realized. Part of an organizer's work in changing power dynamics is to change them within the organization, by making sure a structure is in place that insures power is equally distributed, and that those with privilege, be it based on gender, race, class, education, or experience do not hold an unfair advantage in shaping theory, leadership, decision-making, and/or importance. If an organizer achieves nothing else besides empowering people, then he or she has done a lot. Power is something that everyone has, it just needs to be tapped and drawn out.

### 3) Move towards Collective Action

Ultimately an organization must act. It is no use having empowered people or a great structure if people's power is not used to make things happen and create change. There's a reason that the word "movement" is used after all, because it is based on action. It is also important to remember that the process of empowerment and radicalization is primarily driven by personal and collective experience in action (and reflection upon it afterwards). The three "steps" I have outlined are not really steps at all, but rather three components of a complementary and simultaneous process. Action is made up of strategy and tactics. Strategy is in essence the overall plan of action to accomplish a larger goal. A campaign, itself with its own strategy, might be part of a larger strategy (towards revolution for example).

Tactics are the individual actions which make up a strategy. The role of an organizer is to facilitate whatever course of action or campaign people have decided upon. He or she does this by sharing whatever experiences or skills might be helpful, by asking the right questions that will get people to think in constructive and positive ways (i.e. getting people to think strategically, encouraging creativity and thoughtful choice of tactics, etc.), and making sure that tasks are coordinated and followed through with. The test of a group's structure comes through action, and its weaknesses will often only be revealed at this time.

An organizer should always be assessing what is going wrong or right and bringing these observations up to the group for discussion and possible solutions. An organization's structure should always be seen as a work in progress and never beyond question. It is important to be fluid enough to adapt to changing conditions and situations as well as to compensate for unforeseen flaws.

While organizers should be a motivating force in an organization, true motivation for action can only come from within each person. Passion can definitely be a collective process, however, in that people undoubtedly inspire each other. Enthusiasm is often contagious. That being said, one of the key roles for organizers comes after action when they should be encouraging analysis and assessment, for action without reflection is fruitless. Just as people grow from lessons learned from experience, organizations and movements become more effective and powerful only by assessing past actions and shaping future tactics and strategy based upon such reflection. It is also important that such lessons are institutionalized or made permanent in some way so that people don't have to keep reinventing the wheel. This is why solid organizations are necessary that don't evaporate after time, because we need to be launching from a higher and higher point of experience and awareness each time we act. If lessons are lost when a movement dissipates, then the next generation has to start from the bottom of the ladder once again. This is one of the reasons why a social revolution has yet to be achieved.

### Unconscious and Conscious Rebellion

Anarchists maintain that the current system we live under is irrational, unnatural, and deeply anti-human. Contrary to what many think, the tendency of humanity is actually towards cooperation, freedom, and creativity (in other words, anarchism), so that the social environment we must survive in goes against our natural instincts and inclinations. Given such a context, it is common for people to manifest unconscious feelings of rebellion towards everyday situations that go against their dignity and humanity.

To put it in another way, no one feels comfortable being a slave because it is an inhuman condition. Acts of absenteeism, sabotage, or slowing down on the job are unconscious acts of rebellion against the conditions of work under capitalism. Often, people may be nationalistic or conservative on a conscious level, yet possess unconscious subversive instincts just by virtue of being human. People can only be persuaded to go against their own best interests (which is the purpose of the propaganda of those in power) to a certain point and a certain depth of consciousness.

This concept is an important one for organizers to be aware of and fully understand because it should be central to organizing strategy. It is all too common for those wanting change, especially isolated activists, to develop a view of "ordinary" people as ignorant, reactionary masses who are "the problem."

This view is problematic for two reasons. One, because it estab-

lishes a false division in our minds between activists or revolutionaries and the people. The people are not some abstract mass over there; we are the people. The fact that this way of thinking has become so prevalent demonstrates the isolation that the activist approach has created and its inherent elitism. Secondly, this view ignores the fact that everyone is a potential revolutionary because, as I mentioned, we all unconsciously chafe against this system, from messing up at work to vague hatred of the police to complaints about corporate omnipresence. The process of organizing is thus the process of tapping this unconscious rebellion in people, bringing it out into the open, and helping them to fashion it into a conscious awareness. This can effectively be done using the processes I have mentioned: action and reflection, asking the right questions to transform the unconscious into the conscious, etc.

### **Working in Reform Movements**

Though it may seem distasteful and pointless to anarchists, it is often necessary and important for revolutionary organizers to work within reform movements. This serves four purposes: to build skills, work directly with the oppressed, to understand radicalization, and to be transformed as one transforms others. The fact is that most people, especially anarchists unfortunately, don't have much experience in organizing. Participating in reform movements is a good way to build up solid organizing skills. Experience is the best teacher, and simply reading about organizing is often a poor substitute (which is not to say that one should not read or that skills cannot be shared, they certainly must and should be, but direct experience should not be ignored).

The other reality is that most movements consisting of oppressed people will be generally reformist, especially organizations that people join when first becoming "conscious" or deciding to take action. This is largely because anarchists and other revolutionaries have declined to participate in movements of oppressed people, as organizers or even just as participants. Abdicating this role has left the stage clear for reformists to run the show and monopolize the attention of oppressed people.

Anarchists must work directly with oppressed peoples if we are serious about having any part in a social revolution and contributing to it. And to work directly with the oppressed, we must often work in reform movements. This is not wasted effort on our part despite what we may think of the goals of a movement, because it is vital for an organizer to understand the process of radicalization, and the best school may be in such a movement. It is important for organizers to understand the different ways in which people are radicalized, and how this knowledge can be used to help radicalize others.

Finally, while activists, organizers, and revolutionaries often have a sense of unjustified superiority and ego due to being part of the few who have "advanced ideas," working in reform movements may help bring one down to size. Organizers must always be open and receptive to learning from others. We must never assume that just because we are revolutionary and others are reformist or "ordinary" that they have nothing to teach us. Hopefully, an organizer will be transformed as he or she helps to transform others. In other words, revolutionary organizing is not a one-way process but rather an interchange and back-and-forth of knowledge, experience, ideas, and skills. Despite being useful and important, this process is also necessary to break down any barriers between an organizer and those he or she is working with, though it should be said that the best organizer is one who is already rooted in the struggle he or she is engaged in. Forming

revolutionary movements is of course necessary at some point, but such a movement would highly benefit from organizers with skills and experience built up in other, more reformist movements.

One final question that arises when anarchists and radicals in general work within reformist movements is whether or not we should push our ideas and try to transform the ideas of the organization we are working within. Pushing our ideas as far as trying to promote anarchism within a group, speaking about it, converting people, etc., is not necessarily the most productive way to move towards an anarchistic movement in the future. While I am not saying these practices are necessarily off-limits if the opportunity organically arises, to do so artificially is often counter-productive and disrespectful to those one works with. It is far more productive to fight for anarchistic structures and power dynamics within the group and anarchism as expressed in practice as opposed to anarchism as expressed in theory. It is also far more persuasive than words could ever be.

Such lines aren't always distinct however. To give one personal example, when working within a community movement there came a point where a debate arose whether to engage in an action that was more militant and fell within the rubric of "direct action," or whether to engage in an action that carried less risk and was more "safe." However, as the movement was engaged in fighting for justice for the family of an individual murdered by the police, I felt it was more important to fight for the concept that the individuals most affected by an issue should have more of a say in the matter (in this case, the family erred on the side of caution) than to give support to the decision-making power of outsiders (who wanted the direct action tactic). Whether I was correct in my choice or not, the point is that working within reformist movements provides many situations such as this that test one's tactical and strategic ability in practice and provide valuable experience.

### **Movement of Anarchists or Anarchistic Movement?**

Anarchism developed out of the struggles of people for justice, equality, freedom, and community, not as an armchair ideology. It is thus sad to see how much of what passes for anarchist theory and action today is divorced from "ordinary" people, their movements, and their everyday lives. For those who embrace anarchism as an intellectual game or hobby, they are quite free to pass their lives scribbling away into eternity. But for those who want to see a new society brought about, it is time to get back to the roots, back to the struggle.

We cannot impose our ideas on others without violating the spirit of anarchism. But that is not the goal of organizing, nor is it to manipulate or subvert people. It is not possible or necessary to convert every person into a conscious anarchist, and then launch a movement and revolution from that point. Rather, we should be working together with others to build a movement that is anarchistic in orientation, strategy, and goals. If such a movement can be built, it matters little whether people call themselves anarchists or not.

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# Putting the Control Back in Birth Control:

## Racism, Class and Reproductive Rights

by PJ Lilley and Jeff Shantz

### The Northeastern Anarchist: Repro Series

For working women, control of one's own body is constantly another turf battle in the class war. In this second article in our series on reproduction, we look at birth control and sterilization in the context of other attacks on the poor.

*"Rape, racism, sexism, and capitalism have been consistent elements in a long history of documented assaults against the reproductive sovereignty of Black women." [1]*

-Theryn Kigvamasud' Vashti,  
Communities Against Rape and Abuse

As anarcha-feminists, when we think of "reproductive rights" we usually first think of a woman's right to choose when/where/how she has children in terms of her access to free, safe abortions and multiple birth control technologies. We might think of Emma Goldman standing on a soapbox risking arrest to talk to women about condoms, or of our sisters currently standing on the front lines doing clinic defense actions. But on the flip side of the same coin is the right to choose to have a child, and the access to health care and a safe environment to enable that choice. Creeping liberalism and racism manifest when the equation that abortion equals "individual choice free from state interference", or the interests of white, middle class women become the dominant interpretation of reproductive liberty.

As Dorothy Roberts said to *Ms. Magazine*, too often the movement puts more vigor into defending abortion rights than into

fighting against the limitations put on black women's rights to reproduce. "It's a fatal obfuscation of the principle from which women's demand for reproductive rights springs: that is, the right to be, the right to exist on equal terms with all other women and men, and to create (or choose not to create) others like ourselves." As she argues, increased access to effective new contraceptives does not necessarily enhance or improve women's reproductive freedoms. [2]

Racist, patriarchal states and bosses have worked together to exercise control over women's bodies using bribes, coercion, and outright force. Slave-owning plantation masters find their modern-day counterparts in the export processing zones and maquiladoras of today. The USAID bureaucrats and "family cap" welfare administrators selectively offering Norplant and tubal ligation echo those moral regulators and eugenicists who sterilized women in poor houses, asylums and brothels in the past.

Their tactics range from social assistance incentives, which are often linked to long-term (often unsafe) birth control, to the daily pressures on factory workers to take the Pill, and even so far as state-backed mass sterilization programs. Here we will examine some of these more recent attempts (in our area of Canada and the US) to limit reproductive freedom. Our focus is on the corporate and state-backed implementation of Norplant, and on the more street-based example of vigilantism practiced by a group calling themselves "Project Prevention", and on welfare reform projects in the past decade.[3]

Historically, when we look back at the eugenics programs in the past century, it has clearly been women of color, the disabled, the sick, the women labeled "loose", and overall the poorest women who are the main targets.

Modern eugenics emerged from the Social Darwinism of the late 19th century. Eugenicists' scheme to apply biology to the task of ridding humanity of "undesirables" while promoting "desirables," was explicitly stated by Francis Galton, who coined the term eugenics. Eugenic doctrines, espoused by biologists, physicians and notably the emergent social science disciplines of Psychology

and Sociology, attributed poverty and criminality to an individual's biological make-up rather than the failings of social systems. Instead of looking at political and economic processes characterizing industrial capitalist expansion, proponents of eugenics identified various categories of people who were held responsible for a broad range of social problems and whose reproduction supposedly posed a threat to social stability.

The United States was the first country to sanction eugenic sterilization for those deemed "unfit." The state of Indiana had a forced sterilization law as early as 1907 which was applied to petty criminals, alcoholics, the homeless, unwed mothers, prostitutes, and children with so-called "discipline problems," after they had been herded into prisons, asylums, poorhouses, poor farms, orphans' homes, and reform schools. By the late 1920s sterilization laws had been enacted in 24 states in the US, primarily in the Atlantic region, the Midwest and California.

The performance of eugenic sterilization programs in the US during the 1930s is cited as a major influence on the enactment of sterilization laws in Nazi Germany. While racist Darwinism was espoused only by a minority, even in US states that enacted eugenic laws, Nazism elevated the doctrine to a central position, declaring it official teaching after 1933. As Kevles notes:

*"SS academies, in conjunction with university professors, tried to prove that races develop physical characteristics that can be directly linked to modes of behavior. In an attempt to "purge" the German population of "unworthy" members, about 400,000 men and women were sterilized (criminals, prostitutes, some poor people, alcoholics, members of mixed races, and others). On the same grounds, some people were forced to have abortions and many were killed within the so-called euthanasia program."* [4]

But the racist, classist bias in many birth control programs was certainly not limited to the American racists and German Nazis. Even erstwhile progressives succumbed to eugenics' claims. In Scandinavia, sterilization was widely supported by Social Democrats, as well as noted liberals such as Gunnar Myrdal, in planning for the emerging welfare state. In Sweden thousands of women were sterilized for reasons of eugenics between 1930 and the 1970s. Up to 60,000 were sterilized without consent on such grounds as having an "unhealthy sexual appetite."

Throughout Scandinavia as well as parts of Canada and the southern US sterilization achieved broad support. This was largely related to economic rather than eugenic considerations, as sterilization presented a means of reducing relief and institutional care for the poor. In Alberta, the 'Sterilization Act' of 1928 (started under the father of right-wing politician Preston Manning) specifically targeted people in mental health institutions, but also aimed at native women, new immigrants, the disabled, unwed mothers, women accused of lesbian 'tendencies', and so on. It was only finally ended in 1972, after sterilizing more than 2,000 Albertans.

In the US, Margaret Sanger, a founder of Planned Parenthood who was championed as an early feminist by some in the 1970s, proposed in "A Plan for Peace" (1932) that Congress establish a special department for the study of "population problems" and appoint a Parliament of Population to direct and control the population through a directorship representing various branches of science. Sanger insisted that among the main objectives of the Population Parliament would be "to keep the doors of immigration closed to the entrance of certain aliens whose condition is known to be detrimental to the stamina of the race, such as feeble mind-

ed, idiots, morons, insane, syphilitic, epileptic, criminal, professional prostitutes, and others in this class barred by the immigration laws of 1924." Once controlling "the intake and output of morons, mental defectives, epileptics" Sanger suggested that "the second step would be to take an inventory of the second group such as illiterates, paupers, unemployables, criminals, prostitutes, dope-fieids; classify them in special departments under government medical protection, and segregate them on farms and open spaces as long as necessary for the strengthening and development of moral conduct." [5]

Following World War II, eugenics was largely discredited, through scientific criticism and the opposition of civil libertarians as well as the stigma of its deep connection with the Nazi regime. Still sterilization programs persisted in Canada and Sweden until the 1970s. In addition, echoes of eugenics can be found in recent controversies such as attempts in the US to compel poor women, especially welfare recipients, to undertake risky birth control devices such as Norplant. Eugenics brought together the economic and moral regulation of women's lives, bodies and labor.

A key element that propped up the attempts to justify these sterilizations was an explicit "ableism," the belief that those who for whatever reason, and in whatever manner, are less "abled" should also be stopped from procreation, by whatever means necessary. Here there has always been a complaint about "burdens to society," or reference to saving "tax-paying citizens." As Kigvamasud'Vashti puts it, "The value of people with disabilities is too often measured in capitalists terms - in fact, when officials are determining if a person meets the [US] federal definition of disability of the ten criteria considered is whether the person is economically self-sufficient."

The group known as "Project Prevention" (formerly known as C.R.A.C.K., Children Requiring A Caring Community [sic]) plays on exactly these types of able-bodied supremacist notions. Since the early 90's, this organization has targeted poor women in many major US cities. Started by a white woman who adopted from the same mother four black children with prenatal exposure to crack, their main project is "cash for birth control for drug and alcohol addicts." They offer \$200 to women who agree to sterilization or long-term birth control (you get the \$200 immediately if you have your tubes tied or get a Norplant implant or \$200 in installments over one year if you go with Depo-Provera or Lunelle). Acknowledging that more poor women are going to go for the \$200 than rich, they flier poor, Latino and Black neighborhoods, at homeless drop-ins and shelters, and wherever they feel prostitutes or drug users might frequent. Without any concern for the short or long term health, safety or well being of the women, they use coercion, intimidation and essentially guilt them into giving over direct control over their reproduction. With all Project Prevention's fund raising and venture capitalist support, they give nothing to rehab treatment or housing programs where they recruit. They ignore the fact that if a woman is chemically addicted and in poverty, then she's also more likely to be homeless and at greater risk of rape. By telling these women they're "out of control" and that they and their children a "burden on society," C.R.A.C.K. lays down a lot of shame and discouragement just when a woman may be ready to seek treatment and support, and reinforces instead that her life is not so valuable, and she should just take the \$200.

Knowing that 'tax-paying capitalist' evaluations of life are often completely ass-backwards, feminist activists in Seattle and other cities organized themselves to tear down the Project Prevention flyers. Still, they keep on coming, and also keep trying to pass legislation to make "prenatal crimes" punishable by jail and sterilization.

United States' legislation targeting poor mothers has really taken off in the area of welfare reform. In August of 1993, New Jersey was the first state to impose the family cap for welfare recipients, and by 1998, there were 21 states with some form of capping policy, whereby a (often single) woman with children receiving assistance wouldn't find any additional support if she bore another child. By 1998, 20,000 children were denied benefits in New Jersey, but it hadn't had any real effect on birthrate, and of course, served to drive many women-led families into deeper poverty.

Also starting in the 1990s, Norplant was favored by politicians and legislators as a means of population control. Underlying the distribution and administration of Norplant were racial and class based politics geared towards the control of poor women and especially poor black women.

These plans to require women on welfare to use birth control are nothing new. They have long circulated as part of neo-conservative capitalist policy to regulate the working class. For example, part of Margaret Sanger's *Plan for Peace*, Part E reads: "To insure the country

against future burdens of maintenance for numerous offspring as may be born of feeble minded parents by pensioning all persons with transmissible disease who voluntarily consent to sterilization."

In 1973, University of Chicago physiologist Dwight Ingle, in his sweetly titled book, *Who Should Have Children?*, advocated population control as an alternative to the welfare state.

Ingle proposed that individuals who could not provide their children with a healthy environment or biological inheritance - including people with genetic defects or low intelligence, welfare recipients, criminals, drug addicts, and alcoholics - should be encouraged, or forced if necessary, to refrain from childbearing. [6]

Incredibly, Ingle fantasized about a future age in which tech advances would see the insertion of pellets containing an "anti fertility agent" under the skin of every woman of childbearing age. In order to have the pellets removed women would have to apply for a license. The state would determine who was qualified for parenthood under the guidelines provided above by Ingle. With the invention and dissemination of Norplant in the 1990s, Ingle's nightmarish plan seemed to stand at the threshold of realization.

Thousands of poor black women in the US were targets of an aggressive campaign to have Norplant inserted for reproductive control, with the goal of decreasing their birth rate. The Population Council, a non-profit organization that pushes so-called "family planning" in poorer countries, originally developed Norplant. Pharmaceutical giant Wyeth-Ayerst Laboratories distributed it in the US. Norplant is made up of six silicone capsules filled with the synthetic hormone levonorgestrel, which are implanted just under the skin of a woman's upper arm. Once inserted Norplant prevents pregnancy for up to five years. Only sterilization has a better record of preventing pregnancies.

Immediately upon its approval by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), politicians and social commentators seized upon Norplant as a useful way to control the birth rates of poor

black women. If its long-acting, effective and convenient character made it the perfect contraceptive, as its advocates claimed, it also made it the ideal tool for governments to control the reproduction of poor women.

Only two days after Federal approval of Norplant, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* ran a chilling editorial entitled, "Poverty and Norplant: Can Contraception Reduce the Underclass?" The editorial explicitly put forward a racist and eugenic position, offering a coercive combination of contraception and race. It went on to propose Norplant as a solution to inner-city poverty, suggesting that "the main reason more black children are living in poverty [itself a statistical lie] is that people having the most children are the ones least capable of supporting them." [7] The editorial finished by endorsing the use of financial incentives to "encourage" women on welfare to use Norplant.

Not surprisingly, journalists around the country, from *Newsweek* to the *New Republic* leaped to the *Inquirer's* defense to take up the call for coercive Norplant incentives. David Frankel, director of population sciences at the Rockefeller Foundation, was even more aggressive: "Despite the infantile reaction of some black staffers [who opposed their boss' editorial]...birth control incentives would not be genocide. Such incentives would be a humane inducement to social responsibility." [8] Here again is the racist mythology that poverty is a result of personal irresponsibility and the only solution is "tough love" to force the negli-

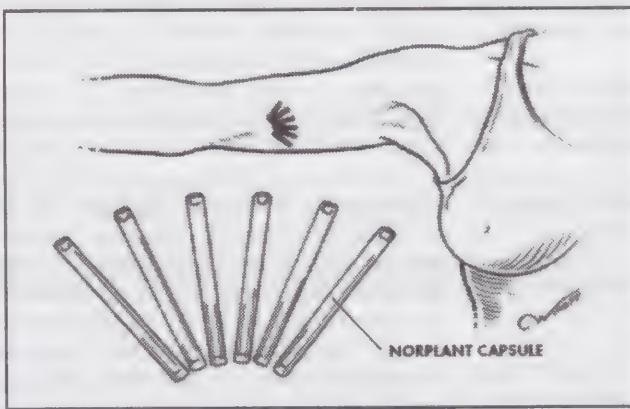
gent to "be responsible." Given the class character of battles over reproduction, of course, not all supporters of Norplant incentives were white. DC Mayor Marion Barry asserted that, "when you start asking the government to take care of [your babies], the government now ought to have some control over you." [9]

The public media pressure put Norplant at the center of a new program of population control politics and government programs for poor women. At the same time that neoliberal governments across the US were cutting social programs, public funding for Norplant became a popular budget item. It costs up to \$500 to implant, \$365 for the capsules and \$500 to remove, and was directed towards poor women through Medicaid.

By 1994, otherwise cost-cutting governments had managed to spend \$34 million on Norplant-related benefits. Half of the women in the US who used Norplant were Medicaid recipients. States also made millions of dollars available to provide Norplant to low income women who were ineligible for Medicaid. Wyeth-Ayerst set up The Norplant Foundation contributing almost \$3 million per year to get Norplant kits to poor women. The company profits partly by targeting the devices at women who cannot "control discontinuation of the product." [10]

Norplant was becoming the only acceptable form of welfare expenditure, as if poor women were poor only because they had children. Never mind that having Norplant inserted did nothing to pay the rent or buy food. Of course, this was primarily about moral regulation and the social control of poor women's bodies since it was directed, even as food and housing provisions were being cut, at women who were already poor but had no children.

Incentives were not enough for some governments. Within two years of Norplant's release, several state legislatures put forward measures either offering financial bonuses for Norplant use or even requiring implantation as a condition of receiving welfare benefits. In 1993 Tennessee passed a law requiring anyone receiving public



assistance to be notified in writing about the state's free provision of Norplant. A North Carolina bill would have required all women having a state-funded abortion to be implanted with Norplant. Bills proposed in Maryland, Mississippi and South Carolina would have made Norplant mandatory for women on welfare.

In case there was any doubt about the eugenic basis of Norplant distribution, Nazi and former-KKK Grand Wizard and Louisiana state representative, David Duke put forward a bill paying women receiving welfare \$100 a year to use Norplant as part of his "concrete proposals to reduce the illegitimate birthrate and break the cycle of poverty that truly enslaves and harms the black race" by "promoting the best strains, the best individuals." [11]

Other experimental measures (such as the "contraceptive vaccine") will likely follow Norplant as methods to reduce the fertility of black women in the US. Such contraceptive vaccines, administered by injection, can be given without a woman's full knowledge or consent. In addition, the contraceptive effect cannot be reversed once the "vaccine" is put into a woman's bloodstream. Clearly, such technologies are a threat to women's reproductive autonomy.

For Norplant, Depo-Provera or IUD, women cannot simply stop using it when they want to. This so-called convenience contributes to its coercive application. The provider controls it, not the women who use it. Once it is implanted it does not rely on a woman's consent and it is easily monitored: the rods are in or not. Health care providers can impose their moral decisions on poor women by refusing to remove it. Ensuring that implants remain in is easily done if governments mandate use. Day-to-day management of birth control is removed from women and given to a technology and the health care system that so badly services poor women. It is not about reproductive freedom but rather about pushing technologies on specified groups in order to achieve social outcomes favorable to elites.

Welfare policy is clearly dictated by capitalist economics and radicalized class politics as the struggles over Norplant show. Quite significantly the move by governments to push Norplant on poor women occurred at the same time that awareness of its negative health effects was growing, a factor leading wealthier white women, who enjoyed greater reproductive choices, to reject Norplant en masse. In a telling example of corporate and government complicity, governments stepped in to rescue their corporate partners by providing, and subsidizing, a market for the increasingly unmarketable technology. Politicians and editors of the capitalist press once again joined together to target explicitly poor black women for Norplant distribution. These media myths rarely have white counterparts in their representations. They play upon deeply manipulated fears in the US about black reproduction. Norplant was primarily distributed in centers with higher proportions of black welfare recipients, even though most women receiving welfare are not black. Because black women are five times more likely to live in poverty or receive welfare and three times more likely to be unemployed than white women in the US, policies directed at women receiving welfare and poor women are a not so sly way of targeting and controlling the lives of black women.

This plays into longstanding welfare ideology or propaganda that blames black single mothers for everything from "deviant lifestyles," welfare "dependency," moral "degeneracy" and other terms that cover up what are really systemic socio-economic failings of capitalism. Rather than being a condemnation of capitalist economies these issues blame women for the viciousness of capitalist relations that brutalize them. Thus race and class politics work together to propel coercive birth control policies. [12]

As the case of Norplant further illustrates, these politics are

played out globally. Most clinical testing for Norplant took place in Brazil, Indonesia and Egypt. Numerous ethical breaches occurred in testing of extremely poor and often illiterate women. As well researchers lost track of large numbers of users - upwards of 30 percent in some cases. In Bangladesh, Norplant clinical trials were conducted on almost 600 women in urban slums. Clinicians did not obtain informed consent to participate and clients were not given prior medical exams. Women were given monetary incentives for the insertion and discouraged from reporting problems. The studies were carried out by the national family planning and biomedical research organization, the Bangladesh Fertility Research Program.

Poverty and racism combine to drive an argument that women's health can be sacrificed for the supposed good of society or to address social problems that are not their making.

Internationally, feminists are making a strong argument that it is not over-population, but over-consumption by the richest 20% of the planet that is causing resource shortages and is destroying the environment. Also, socializing the costs of health care is crucial for our survival. Right now in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the infant mortality rate for black babies is 2.24% and 0.75% for white. It is a perpetuation of basically a 'caste' system to maintain the racist status quo.

Struggles for real reproductive liberty must be - can only be - part of struggles against racism and economic exploitation. Besides doing our clinic defenses for women seeking abortion, and just as vigorously as we would fight Nazis in the street, we need to confront the racists in the boardrooms that set welfare policy, and the right wing that organizes behind groups like "Project Prevention." [13] As one activist feminist put it, "Oppression needs to be eliminated, not the reproductive capacity of women." [14]

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## Notes

[1] Fact Sheet on Positive Prevention /C.R.A.C.K., prepared by Theryn Kigvamasud'Vashti, Communities Against Rape and Abuse, 2002

[2] Interview with Dorothy Roberts, by Moira Brennan. *Ms. Magazine*, April 2001. <http://www.msmagazine.com/apr01/roberts.html>

[3] A future article in the NEA series on reproduction will address the context for migrant laborers and women in newly industrialized countries.

[4] Eugenics and human rights - Statistical Data Included  
British Medical Journal, August 14, 1999 by Daniel J Kevles

[5] Sanger, Margaret. "Plan for Peace." Birth Control Review, 1932, 107-8

[6] Roberts, Dorothy. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty*. Pantheon Books, 1997, page 110

[7] ibid, page 106.

[8] ibid, pg. 107

[9] ibid, pg. 108

[10] ibid, pg. 128

[11] ibid, pg. 109

[12] ibid, pg. 112

[13] see their website at [www.projectprevention.org](http://www.projectprevention.org) for a listing of cities where they recruit

[14] Hartman, Betsy - *Cracking Open CRACK*, zmag.org, 2000

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# From The Italian and Spanish Anarchist Movements: toward a four part revolutionary strategy

by Thomas Giovanni

The Italian and Spanish anarchist movements of the 1860s to the 1920s and 30s respectively, were two of the most widespread and active explicitly anarchist movements the world has ever seen. Accordingly, the contemporary anarchist movement has much to learn from these two movements. However, I assert this cautiously; for not only were there many problems in both movements, but their effective activities, strategies and tactics were time and context specific.

For ease of discussion, I will refer to these more or less internationalist, multi-faceted, loosely defined and associated anarchist tendencies as the Spanish and Italian anarchist movements respectively.

My analysis of the Spanish and Italian anarchist movements led me to break down their revolutionary activity into four areas: survival mechanisms, counter-institutions, consciousness raising and cultural development, and modes of attack. Using this general framework, as well as the specific lessons in each of the four areas, one might reformulate and engage these histories with contemporary movements, challenges, needs, desires, strategies, etc. to offer suggestions in developing a revolutionary strategy. Such a strategy would include survival mechanisms and counter institutions that incorporate: housing, food, health, clothing, transportation, education and social spaces. It would involve modes of attack and the bottom-up development of culture and consciousness that directly confronts the fundamental causes of oppression: capitalism, the state, patriarchy, racial inequity, homophobia and ecological disharmony.

Such a culture and a consciousness must necessarily be more accountable, integrated, principled, resilient and truly based in solidarity, and the corresponding horizontal conception of subjective responsibility and respect. In accordance with the ideal of bottom-up organizing and community self-management, one should not attempt to create a universal detailed revolutionary theory or overly defined universal organizing strategy because such organizing must be founded in geographic, cultural, temporal and circumstantial contexts.

## Survival Mechanisms

Survival mechanisms from tactical voting to trade union organizing to cultural resiliency aided in shielding the movements from increasingly oppressive social, political and eco-

nomic forces. Not only did these mechanisms protect the movements, but consequently gave them room to build their forces and shift from the defensive to the offensive. Although such mechanisms may be challenged as sapping the energy from more revolutionary activity, at their most basic level these mechanisms, for many, were necessary for their basic survival or at least their ability to participate in a more developed and complex revolutionary movement. One need only look at the history, in both Italy and Spain as well as more globally, of the failure and co-optation of unorganized, underdeveloped, undercoordinated and undersupported anarchistic revolt to realize the need for the greater revolutionary participation that survival mechanisms provide. To guard against the distracting and disempowering tendencies of reformism, survival mechanisms must be thoroughly scrutinized for their tactical benefits in providing long-term revolutionary benefit. But in all cases, the needs and interests of everyone must never be ignored or treated unequally to avoid the horrifying dangers of subordinating human beings to some kind of objectifying revolutionary ideology.

At the turn of the century in Italy and Spain, the increasing alignment of the anarchist movement, and key anarchist leaders such as Errico Malatesta, with the labor movement (despite criticism of the reformist tendencies), is evidence of the focus on survival mechanisms. With the rise of industrial capitalism in Italy, economic conditions became desperate. Unions such as the USI in Italy and the CNT in Spain not only helped make advances in pay, hours, working conditions and worker control (under pressure from labor, Italian provincial governments helped found Chambers of Labor and Spain was the first country in the world to proclaim the 8-hour day into law); but they gave workers the time and resources to engage in all sorts of revolutionary activity from general strikes, to insurrections, to propaganda efforts, to building counter institutions such as Ferrer Modern Schools.

Both Italian and Spanish movements saw the devastation brought about by uncoordinated, under-supported, unorganized and underdeveloped struggle. After the failure of the 1864 Polish Revolution, Bakunin and his associates started to realize the necessity of widespread, even international organization for the survival of any struggle. Hence, exiled Italian anarchists worked to start movements around the world. Among the more significant outcomes of such efforts, Giuseppe Fanelli's 1868 trip to Spain not only broadened the international support networks,

but also planted the seeds of anarchism that led to the famous Spanish Revolution of 1936. Years later, when Bakunin seemed to forget this lesson telling Malatesta to fight for his own people instead of engaging in solidarity with revolutionary struggles abroad, Malatesta reminded him of this survival lesson, responding: "wherever Carthage is fought, Rome is defended." Although the effects of international coordination and support are often complex, a clear example of the benefit of international solidarity as a survival mechanism is the success of the 1924 protests of French workers and intellectuals against the extradition proceedings of Spanish anarchists, Buenaventura Durruti and Francisco Ascaso.

But the lesson was not simply about international solidarity for the survival of larger social revolutionary movements, it also was clearly necessary for the survival of more localized and regional struggle. In 1869, a spontaneous, under-supported peasant revolt in Northern Italy against a milling tax failed and left 257 peasants dead, 1099 wounded and 3,788 arrested. Also in Italy, another spontaneous peasant revolt during the economic crisis of 1873-74 was easily suppressed. In Spain, the Bracero movements of the 1830's and 40's failed to survive because of their isolation from each other and thus, lack of coordination and solidarity between them.

Later in Catalonia, an uprising in 1909 was easily suppressed due to lack of outside support mainly due to the deliberate miscommunication of the revolt outside the region as solely a Catalan autonomist uprising. Time and time again, isolated survival struggles were put down due to lack of coordination and lack of solidarity.

Where solidarity was employed effectively, such as in the 1919 strike of hydroelectric company workers in Catalonia, there was success. In one act of solidarity during the strike, printers kept government proclamations that attempted to call up strike breaking military reserves out of newspapers. Also, railway and trolley service solidarity strikes kept external military forces from getting to the city. The strike effectively shut down the city with seventy percent of the factories in the area halted. Although most of the workers originally engaged in the strike in solidarity with the hydroelectric workers, they took advantage of the situation to make demands - that were all met - for increased wages, union recognition, the 8-hour day, and the reemployment of discharged personnel.

Although, these are all reforms to the system, these survival mechanisms enabled Catalan workers to engage in more revolutionary activity with the increased time and resources. Catalonia, of course, later became the center of the Spanish Revolution in 1936. In contrast, a once thriving and active peasant movement in Andalusia ended due to starvation. The importance of these survival mechanisms in combination with other movement building tactics was also evident in 1930 when the CNT membership grew from being virtually non-existent during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship to half a million people in one year after being given conditional legality.

Heavy involvement and good relations within larger communities also helped in the survival of anarchists and the anarchist movement. A principled culture of high ideals in Italy led to widespread public sympathy and the acquittal of anarchists at the 1875 trials in Rome, Florence, and Trani. As already mentioned, international support to block extradition proceedings derived from the principled character of the anarchist movement. And when there was repression of actions with wide public support, such as during the uprising of 1909 in Barcelona, the effect was only an increased radicalization and militancy of the public.

However, while employing survival tactics and building a movement and culture based in solidarity is essential for the basic survival of any struggle, the distracting and disempowering tendencies of reformism must be avoided. During the 1918 CNT congress in Spain, union members reaffirmed their long-time opposition to strike funds in favor of more militant direct action tactics. While they recognized the importance of certain survival mechanisms such as voluntary solidarity contribution from employed workers during struggle, they felt accumulating strike funds, as Angel Pestaña put it: "dulled [a worker's] desire to struggle." In Italy also, Malatesta and others opposed the extension of labor law as disempowering to worker control over their own movement.

In 1882, the extension of suffrage to lower-middle class citizens, educated artisans and a small portion of the proletariat, also worked to diminish direct action struggle in favor of socialist electoral strategies. In 1890, Malatesta worked with others in a campaign against electoral activity, which he regarded simply as a political safety valve of the oppressive socio-economic system to relieve the pressure and redirect the energy of the oppressed from making real fundamental change. Such anti-electoral campaigns were not without good cause. For example, when anarchists helped elect Prieto in the 1931 election in Spain, instead of following through on promises to cancel privileges with North American investor ITTC, he broke the strike against it and protected it from anarchist action. As Bookchin argues about Prieto, politicians often arouse hope without fulfilling needs.

Despite the strong association of anarchism to anti-electoralism, anarchists did use the ballot box as a survival tactic at times. This mostly came out of an analysis that refused to accept the objectification of people, that is, refused to accept the wide scale sacrifice of the well being of many for the sake of ideology. In 1897, in response to the repression of an especially reactionary government, Merlino called for the use of elections, not as an end towards fundamental change, but as a survival tactic. After the "no votar" campaign of November 19, 1933 brought two devastating years of severe repression known as "el bienio negro" (two black years), the Spanish anarchists became part of the coalition to bring to power the moderately leftist Popular Front in February 1936. The key differentiation between the election as a survival tactic and the election as a means of reform was the anarchists' lack of faith in the electoral system to create any kind of fundamental change necessary for the liberation of the oppressed. Accordingly, as soon as the Popular Front government was elected the CNT engaged in an "unabated strike wave that exploded across Spain." In the countryside "Spain was in the throes of a full-scale revolution... comparable in every way to the great land revolts of Mexico and Russia." The electoral tactic was simply a stepping-stone towards revolution, not an end to survival per se. While some leading anarchists went too far and engaged in electoral politics after the election, hurting the movement, the majority of anarchists and anarchist sympathizers used survival tactics as a shield in building towards social revolution.

### Counter Institutions

Spain and Italy saw the rise of anarchist and oppressed peoples' counter institutions. Not only did they serve as alternatives for socio-economic organization, their presence actively threatened and worked against more oppressive forms of socio-economic organization. One might associate the nature of counter institu-

tions with the revolutionary adage "building a new society within the shell of the old." But to capture the dynamic of a true counter institution more accurately it must be stressed that the new and the old are not autonomous from each other; hence the confrontational connotation of the term "counter." Instead the new diminishes the strength of the old and eventually helps to break through it. For, oppressive institutions depend upon and derive all power from the exploitation of the oppressed. By providing anti-oppressive counter institutions, not only is that exploited social power no longer available for the dependent oppressor, but it is actively redirected against it. The important lesson of anarchists in regards to counter institutions is that power must be invested in all equally, not captured by a revolutionary vanguard to serve in the name of others.

On the relation of the individual to society, oppressive social institutions such as the state, the church, capitalism, racial inequity and patriarchy all work to subjugate and divide peoples' social forces against themselves and each other. Depression, violence, disempowerment, alienation and addiction are some of the secondary effects of these institutions. At the base level, affinity groups in Spain that developed out of the traditional Spanish "tertulia" served as an anarchist counter institution. Affinity groups brought people of like inclinations together for their mutual benefit and development. They served as a basis for planning anarchist action. And they worked in solidarity and mutual aid, not competition, with other anti-oppressive affinity groups. By serving as a forum for the discussion of ideas, they often times were the basis for challenging the legitimacy of oppressive social institutions and empowering their members to struggle as a strong unit against these oppressive forces. They provided a personalized alternative to a social system that exploited and objectified. Bookchin describes that one of the more famous affinity groups, the Solidarios, "resembled a community rather than a conventional political organization." Whereas adult anarchists formed affinity groups in the FAI, the younger anarchists did so in groups such as the Syndicalist Youth and Libertarian Youth.

Serving as more physical social counter institutions, the *centro obrero* (worker center) and the *cameri del lavoro* (chamber of labor) provided refuge and a space for the empowerment and development of local communities. *Centros obreros* provided literature, books, classes, meeting halls and later incorporated local CNT offices. In early 1919, especially in small Andalusian towns, they became centers for self-governing town assemblies before a military offensive later that year destroyed them. The rapid and severe military offensive of 1919 proved just how much *centros obreros* threatened powerful political and economic systems of control.

In Italy, *cameri del lavoro*, which in the 1890s were originally granted by and connected to provincial government, became autonomous in the early 20th century and as Carl Levy puts it: they were "the most important and accessible institutions affecting working-class daily life." Through *cameri del lavoro*, local communities controlled the local labor market in addition to organizing sympathy strikes and boycotts. Like in Spanish *centros obreros*, local communities gathered to hold *comizio* (public meetings) and pass *ordini del giorno* (resolutions) that "were treated as plebiscites by the local labor movement." They also served as shelters for anti-militarist, anti-clerical and popular education movements as well as cultural centers for festivals, educational programs and neighborhood meeting places. During the Biennio Rosso conflict of May and June 1919, these counter institutions broke through the shell of the old briefly, as shop keepers voluntarily turned over their keys to the *cameri del lavoro* creating for many Italians "a condition of dual power".

Anarchists in Italy and Spain also organized with unions as a counter institution. In Italy, during the 1920 Biennio Rosso, members of the USI helped inspire, participate in and hold for one month the occupied engineering and automobile factories. In Spain during the Revolution of 1936, the CNT, breaking through the shell of old oppressive institutions, facilitated the bottom-up self-management of occupied village communes, farms and industrial enterprises on a wide-scale. Not only had these union organizing efforts diminished the power of capitalist enterprises through wage, hour and working conditions struggles, they also served as counter institutional forces to replace capitalist economic relations in various occupation attempts. For the most part, these occupations were anarchist controlled from the bottom-up. However, there are many criticisms of the nature of these takeovers from Garcia Oliver and Errico Malatesta criticizing the salaried officialdom of the CNT as increasing centralization and bureaucratization to Spanish anarchist leaders actually joining the municipal government (supposedly as an emergency measure) during the Revolution of 1936. This action went too far. For the problem is not the people who wield power, but the power relation itself and the corrupting nature of power.

### Consciousness-raising and Cultural Development

The nature of consciousness-raising and cultural development is complex and difficult to ascertain completely. But given that this area of activity was vitally important to the development, resiliency and effectiveness of both the Italian and Spanish Anarchist movements, it seems necessary to attempt to highlight some of the most significant modes and effects of consciousness-raising and cultural development. Consciousness raising formed the basis for the recruitment of new members both in informing people of the oppressive nature and workings of major social, political and economic institutions and in providing methods of confronting and changing these institutions. During periods of severe repression, a strongly committed consciousness and a culture of solidarity and resiliency served to maintain the movement. During periods of attack, it kept the movement strong, coherent and confident. When consciousness broke down or an accountable and relevant culture diverged, the movement declined.

Lectures, public meetings, discussion groups, newspapers, leaflets, pamphlets, books, and other forms of propaganda and public education were some of the more widely used and effective modes of consciousness-raising and cultural development. In Italy, Bakunin and associates in Libertà e Giustizia started the anarchist socialist movement through a newspaper, lectures and small discussions. In Spain, the early anarchists were recruited through local meetings with cultural groups, mutual aid societies and economic liberals. The early movement took the form of cultural circles and education societies from which they engaged in propaganda activities and the production of newspapers. During the summer of 1918, the anarcho-syndicalist CNT launched a massive propaganda campaign in Catalonia which increased CNT membership from 75,000 in June to 350,000 by the end of the year. Institutionally, *centros obreros*, *camere del lavoro* and libertarian schools, served as cultural centers that helped keep the movements strong and healthy. In Italy, these cultural centers in conjunction with such cultural forms as the songs and poetry of Pietro Gori kept anarchist culture dominant at the grassroots level, even as political parties dominated socialism. In Spain, the culture of solidarity

became so strong between towns with centro obreros and their corresponding sindicato unico that it became difficult to keep a strike isolated to one locality.

On a more qualitative level, anarchists were building a committed and strong popular culture. Throughout Italy, research suggests, anarchists were "admired for their high ideals and considered intellectuals of the second socialist culture". Bookchin argues that the Spanish anarchists exhibited commitment, idealism, militancy and a principled outlook. They built a counter-society based on passionate devotion to their friends and comrades, solidarity, love for humanity, hard work and moral regeneration. In contrast to a system of parochialism, superstition, ignorance and subordination to authority, anarchists imparted dignity, self-worth, generosity towards their own class, respect for culture, and a support for bold ideas. Anarchist tactics, organization, and education also built a popular culture that fostered a high degree of initiative.

Malatesta is a great example of a person manifesting the spirit of the anarchist movement. In 1892, he asserted that anarchists "must be inspired and guided by sentiments of love, love for all men," for "love is the moral foundation, the soul of our program." Pernicone argues that Malatesta combined "a deep love of humanity and hatred of oppression with an indomitable spirit." In the summer of 1884, when Southern Italy was struck by a cholera epidemic, Malatesta and other Italian anarchists, though under threat of police repression, volunteered in a Naples hospital until the epidemic passed and they were forced to flee the country.

Luisa Minguzzi and others revived the anarchist movement in 1876 and 1877 through working class women's greater involvement and influence, as well as a greater attention to gender issues. In Tuscany especially, Minguzzi and other women from the tobacco factories formed an all women's anarchist group that built strong representation among the sigararie in Florence. This organizing spread anarchist influence and bolstered anarchist confidence in the surrounding towns of the countryside. Similar organizing occurred during the Spanish Revolution as working class women organized themselves to form all-women's militias. Consciousness of the need for gender equality took many progressive forms in both Italy and Spain; but fell short. Men still dominated anarchist organizing and fulfilled the vast majority of anarchist leadership positions. Patriarchy weakened the Italian and Spanish anarchist movements.

Certain tendencies within the anarchist movement became completely contradictory to others. The 1890s saw an outburst of anti-societal violence and terrorism by those claiming to be anarchists. According to Malatesta, this tendency paralleled those individualist anarchists who seemed to be fighting for a "vague abstraction." Malatesta condemned this objectification in pointing out the absurdity of "the comrade who confesses himself indifferent to the massacre of three-quarters of mankind so that Humanity might be free and happy." Another problematic tendency, revolutionary fatalism, which thought the revolution was inevitable, pushed many anarchists into states of "disgruntled passivity." Secret, anti-organizationalist groupings, which confused organization with authority, helped induce the separation of anarchism from real working-class struggle into a state of subcultural, isolated ineffectiveness. Merlino, finally frustrated with attempts to work with these individualist groups exclaimed: "Nothing joins us. It is evident that, since they permit neither organization nor collective

action, we have nothing to accomplish together." Only the early 20th century reformulation of anarchism as a popular movement deeply entrenched in mass struggle and fighting the social causes of oppression could revive it as a relevant and effective movement.

## Modes of Attack

*"Real anarchist violence ceases where the need for defense and liberation ceases. It is tempered by the awareness that individuals, taken in isolation, are hardly, if at all responsible for the positions which heredity or environment have bestowed on them. It is inspired not by hatred but love, and it is sacred because its goal is the liberation of all and not the substitution of one form of domination with another." - Errico Malatesta*

In considering modes of attack used by Italian and Spanish anarchists to fight oppression, the nature, type, context and effects of the attack mechanism must all be taken into account. Attack mechanisms ranged from mass, public, coordinated campaigns to individual terrorist actions. Protests, strikes, local insurrections, assassination attempts, expropriation, rent strikes, terrorism, social relationship reformulation, occupations of all sorts, civil disobedience and physical violence are among the many modes of attack that were applied in the name of anarchy and by self-identifying anarchists. The effects of these attacks varied widely from severe repression and virtual elimination of the movement to the destabilization of capitalism and social revolution.



Anarchist militawomen preparing to leave for the Saragossa front, Spain 1936

To the growth of such occurrences Merlino asserted, "[A]narchy has been diminished, disfigured, and rendered unrecognizable." But like the Malatesta quote at the beginning of this section suggests, anarchism isn't simply anti-statism in the broadest sense of the word. Rather, it involves a whole set of ideals and principles including mutual aid, solidarity, equality, freedom, direct action, and liberation. I will also assume that anarchism during this time, at the very least, opposed capitalism, the state, authoritarian society (i.e. religious and other cultural subordination) and patriarchy. Accordingly, I will attempt to differentiate between the divergent tactics of attack that are congruent with anarchism at this basic level.

One of the most effective modes of attack was the general strike. The general strike was a common tool of both movements after the rise of anarcho-syndicalism in the early 20th century. In Italy, for example, there were general strikes in 1904, 1905, 1906,

1909, 1911 and 1914. They were most effective when coordinated on a mass scale in many localities. When they were not on a mass scale or coordinated regionally, they were crushed violently by state forces. For example, the 1909 general strike in Barcelona, though very effectively organized inside the city and immediate region, failed to gain widespread support outside the region. The result was the failure of the attempt, 1725 indictments, 450 sentences, 17 to death and 5 executed including Francisco Ferrer. However, because the strike had been so well coordinated internally and commanded the moral support of most people in the city, the repression backfired leading to an increased militancy and influence of anarchism. General strikes were seen strategically as the "stepping stone to insurrectionary confrontation." Fulfilling this strategic purpose, the revolution of 1936 in Spain was preceded by an "unabated strike wave" that destabilized capitalism and brought revolution.

Insurrectionary attempts without widespread, popular backing and engagement not only failed but arguably hurt anarchism irreparably. In 1877, during the Banda del Matese expedition, Errico Malatesta, Luisa Minguzzi and others led a small band of insurgents through peasant villages in the mountains burning government documents and proclaiming the villagers free. This insurrection's flawed assumption was that the oppressed had a latent revolutionary consciousness that just needed to be sparked. Instead of joining the revolt, "the peasants applauded the symbolic gestures, cheered the insurgents as they departed, and then returned to their daily routine." The three other areas of revolutionary activity - survival mechanisms, consciousness raising and cultural development, and counter institutions - had not formed the basis of this insurrection and thus the peasants, beaten down by years of oppression, scared of state forces, without an adequate sense of an alternative, and unprepared for social revolution, did not follow suit. This action, without popular support, led to the complete destruction of the Italian section of the International, gave an excuse for the government to engage in all sorts of repression and pushed former anarchist adherents to adopt electoral socialism or individualistic, anti-organizational terrorist tactics. From 1878-1880, the rise of assassination attempts in the name of anarchy contributed to the previous characterization of anarchists as "dangerous sociopaths."

In attacking patriarchy, public education regarding gender equality and campaigns surrounding particularly gendered issues - such as birth control campaigns - helped reinforce the empowerment of women. Both Italy and Spain were extremely patriarchal societies, so despite strong efforts towards liberation and positive steps forward, the anarchist movement fell short of living up to its proclaimed goal of gender equality. However, efforts at social relationship reorganization included anarchist marriages that recognized both partners as free and equal. Rejecting the conception of women as property, the 1936 Congress of the CNT in Saragossa proclaimed "free love, with no more regulation than the free will of the men and women concerned, guaranteeing the children with the security of the community." Anarchist women worked in organizing leadership roles and were on the front lines of anarchist attack, from Luisa Minguzzi leading insurrectionary plots to the all-women militias during the Spanish Civil War of 1936. As mentioned, there were many flaws and the movements certainly fell short of attacking patriarchy to the fullest extent possible. But significant progress was made within the anarchist movement as compared to broader society due to the leadership of self-organizing anarchist women.

Occupations served as a puncture to the capitalist system and are fundamental to an anti-capitalist revolution; for they break centralized economic power and reorganize it in a socialist manner. Of all areas of revolutionary activity and of all anarchist modes of attack, occupations tend to occur latest. The act of occupation marks a definitive anti-capitalist revolutionary shift in which action becomes not just an offensive towards revolution but also now a defense of revolution. In the 1920's during the Biennio Rosso, the month-long occupation of the automobile and engineering factories, and land occupations in the south marked the farthest Italian anarchism got in anti-capitalist revolution before being destroyed by Mussolini's fascist forces. During the Spanish Revolution of 1936, in the areas where they were successful, the occupations of land and factory marked the incorporation and defense of socialist economic relations with the attack on capitalism.

### Conclusion

The four areas of revolutionary activity exhibited in Spain and Italy during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, show the complexity and comprehensive nature of social revolution. These 4 areas strongly overlap and mutually reinforce each other. Survival mechanisms are necessary to make space for revolutionary activity but need to be analyzed tactically in a way that doesn't objectify human needs, yet doesn't create a safety valve dynamic. Counter-institutions must not only provide an alternative institution to the oppressive order but actively work against the existing order. Consciousness raising and cultural development are fundamental to movement building, sustenance and empowerment. Modes of attack must be social in nature, coordinated on a mass-scale, enjoy public moral support, be coordinated on a regional, national or international level and display a direct and full rejection of all oppressive institutions.



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# We Are More Than We Eat

## A Reply to Tom Wetzel's Defense of Participatory Economics

by Odessa Steps

In my critique of parecon, *The Sad Conceit of Participatory Economics* (NEA#8), I posed four questions for parecon. Tom Wetzel in his reply, *Debating Economic Vision for a Society without Classes* (NEA#9), has managed to answer none of them satisfactorily while taking a fairly ham-fisted swipe at anarcho-communist economics in return. So what were these questions?

### (1) Could a system of exchange relations like parecon ever prevent the re-emergence of capitalist social relations?

I argued that the parecon system could not prevent people working harder or longer, earning more consumption shares, delaying consumption in order to build up 'capital' and then using this capital to subvert the parecon system in their own interests. All the texts on parecon suggest that there would be laws and regulations to prevent it, that the 'system' would simply not provide inputs (money, machinery and supplies) to proto-capitalists. But isn't this a centrally-planned and controlled economy?

Compare this with anarchist-communism. Tom asked, "If someone wants to employ wage slaves, can they do so?" Within anarchist-communism there is no money and no private property. You could 'commandeer' an abandoned factory, persuade producer federations to supply you machinery and materials and advertise for people to work in the factory. But they would do so only because they want to and see value in 'your' project not because you have money to persuade them to do it: *because there is no money*. Things might be produced but who would you sell them to? *There is no money*. And what is to stop people simply turning up at your factory and taking what they want: there is no property. And if the workers decided to 'collectivize' the factory and get rid of the boss (you), you couldn't stop them, either by moral or physical force. You focus on the economics of it all; we focus on power and its abolition as the basis of relationships between human beings.

We will have to change the economic basis of the revolutionary society, Tom and I agree on that. But the idea of exchanging one set of masters (the bosses) for another (the IFBs parecon proposes) while risking the re-emergence of a new capitalist class is simply grotesque. Some libertarian socialists have advocated central planning, as Tom says, but not anarchist-communists and not the Anarchist Federation. We're beyond trying to control an essentially market-based, capitalist economy with sticking plaster solutions as parecon does, or as worker's democracy promises to do.

### (2) Could parecon operate without controlling institutions and/or governments?

Tom answered this question for me when he said society must "have a means of settling basic rules and of enforcing those rules". Parecon society is, therefore, an artificial construct containing and constraining people rather than voluntary and organic relationships between human beings.

When asked about government, pareconomists get a bit shifty and vague. Their basic line is that governments primarily exist to correct the deficiencies of the market system and since parecon is perfect what need for a state? They also say that political decisions would be decided on a participatory basis. But how? Essentially pareconomists mean that a democratic majority would have the right to dictate to a minority and will have the means to enforce their decisions through the operation of controlling economic and social institutions.



For instance, in dealing with the question of black markets and re-emerging capitalist economies, pareconomists say: "...society might make non-planning transfers illegal...." Who is passing these laws except governments, bureaucracies or democratic majorities? Pareconomists also accept that parecon society will have the right to prosecute people breaking its economic [iron] laws; how, except with police, lawyers, fines, courts, judges and prisons? They also say "...the economy will not allot resources to a [capitalist] production unit...". How, unless the producer federations and IFBs close ranks against upstart [dissident?] entrepreneurs. And isn't this a power relationship?

### (3) Would we be compelled to work?

The problem with parecon is that it requires people to work. If you don't want to work or want to work in ways society finds 'unproductive' or assigns a low value to, you will be poor all your life or starve. Tom's use of the example of a poet on a desert island was very revealing. Parecon rewards people partly for 'effort'; but who decides its value? Might parecon decide that one hour of easy art might need to be 'balanced' by two hours of hard ditch-digging? And who do I appeal to if I disagree? Someone, somewhere is going to decide the 'value' of your effort and a global parecon soci-

ety will have no space for people who take a different view. There's another side to this. Tom says that businesses cut costs to stay competitive (he's right) but misses the point that *people* have their own interests as well. Suppose a group of workers in a self-managing factory were to reorganize how they work on a more efficient basis, reducing input shares and lightening their workload? Since parecon rewards us for our *effort*, the instant response of the IFBs would be to cut our wages or demand that we balance our jobs by taking some other, shittier work as well.

Tom believes that we should think about (and base our society) on what is "*the best use of our time for satisfying the needs and desires of people.*" Work must be personally fulfilling but its primary value is not to satisfy the needs and desires of [other] people. Society should exist to satisfy our needs and desires, not the other way round. Because human beings are both individual and social, we will decide to be 'useful' because it fulfils our needs (to co-operate, to socialize or have solidarity with, to interact with other human beings in positive ways).

Suppose instead of trying to create equal jobs we start from the assumption that *people* are (socially) equal. And suppose work was voluntary so that no-one could be "confined to sweeping the floors" as Tom fears (and we agree). A society based on the principles of equality and voluntary association would be far saner, spiritually harmonious, fairer and functionally efficient than one endlessly inventing new ways to control or channel artificially-induced instincts like the will-to-power or self-seeking.

Parecon is not a revolutionary proposal, nor even one of the (economic) building blocks of a revolutionary movement. It is reformist. It accepts certain things as given and certain solutions as necessary. If humans need to have rules imposed upon them, to be governed, then so be it says parecon. Parecon is about human beings as *they are* and trying to control and regulate their behavior. Anarchist-communism is about humanity as *it is becoming*, who will agree the terms upon which we live together as free and equal individuals.

#### **(4) How would parecon prevent the emergence of groups and classes with divergent economic and social agendas?**

Interestingly, Tom alluded to this in his reply when he said "The liberation of the working class requires not only a new economic order [parecon] but also a new political order through which we are empowered to defend our social order". Defend against who? Contending social classes or organizations? And how? Through adversarial political parties?

Tom uses the example of the Spanish Civil War to try to discredit anarchist-communist ideas about 'politics'. But he draws quite the wrong conclusions. The Spanish Revolution failed because the CNT and its allies couldn't dismantle the *economic* means by which the working class are politically controlled and exploited: not just the government but also the banks and lending houses, the wages and contracts system, taxation, property laws and so on. They failed because while anarchists had a very profound understanding of politics and power, they did not have the opportunity or will to extend anarchist-communist economics and social relations throughout Spain.

Tom's reply does not touch on the question of re-emergent trade unions and political parties, mutual and self-interested associations demanding more for their members. Yet even in his own formulations he accepts that people could give part of their consumption shares to the party of their choice or sell subversive literature to those who want to buy it. Parecon imagines a utopia where

everyone has so much they will remain forever immune from the siren song of wanting *more* or clarion calls against injustice.

Parecon imagines a 'society' of billions of individualistic worker-consumers who won't care about inequities or issues so long as they are getting their fair share. Because our share of overall consumption rises and falls *through the job-balancing process* according to circumstances we largely have no control over, there are bound to be occasions when people will feel under-rewarded or over-exploited. Over us all stand the IFBs. The 'co-ordinating' function is actually a control function. The IFBs must extract surplus value from work [taxation] in order to fund non-productive, public activities (firefighters, ambulance drivers, etc.). Suppose one group of workers thought the IFBs had become bloated, cost too much to operate? Their worker and consumer councils might pass resolutions demanding more pay or less taxation but either the IFBs would need to refuse their demands or accede, requiring other workers and communities to earn a little less or pay a little more.

## **Economics of a Free Society**

So how would society and its economy be organized on the basis of anarchist communism? What are the main issues affecting it? Assuming the abolition of money, wages, wage slavery, jobs, banks, lending houses, taxation and the like, the chief issues are: (a) organizing work, particularly equitably, (b) efficient planning and co-ordination, (c) equitable sharing of goods produced, (d) avoiding waste and disutility.

**Equitable Work:** Firstly, the definition of 'work' will fundamentally change. The difference between what we call work, jobs, toil, chores, play, hobbies and the like - the full range of human activity - will dissolve. What remains will be things we choose to do. Now some of those things will be 'necessary', 'socially useful', 'productive' in social terms but primarily important because we choose to do them. Other things are what people like Tom regard as shirking (poetry, for instance) or things we can't have until we've earned them (leisure). But poetry and play and leisure and art and hobbies are as socially useful as anything else. How many of us feel good about our life and our work after a weekend hiking in the mountains, watching the game or fixing up an old Chevy? And by decentralizing activity and production to the local level, there will be facilities for us to be productive in our leisure time, making jewellery, teaching poetry, painting urban murals, digging the communal gardens or whatever.

Of course Tom's fear is the socially-corrosive effect of shirking, the 'free riders' who contribute nothing to society. If you accept that work must always be involuntary, boring or unfulfilling then you are right to fear that many millions of people will avoid it like the plague. But most work is co-operative, and social. If we democratize work as well as society, and if we can choose the work we do and when to do it, if we chose only to do fulfilling or interesting work (fulfilling and interesting to us, not everyone is the same), then how many 'shirkers' would there be?

Tom's example of a poet amongst shipwrecked sailors presupposes a society that is unstable, facing crisis everyday, without any reserves or margins to sustain it. But what about a stable, self-sustaining society of abundance (or at least post-scarcity), where we have used knowledge wisely, applied technology sensibly, created millions of largely self-sufficient diverse communities, where everyone has enough? What then?

The revolution will be a *moral* revolution, a fundamental evolution within humanity towards ethical living. Members of the free

society will be both individual and communal, who do things that are both personal and social, who please themselves and co-operate because it is these billions of actions *in sum* and entirely voluntary that make up everything society is. People look hard for anarchist-communism's "economic system" and fail to find it because they are looking in the wrong place. The mistake they make is to assume that because they can't see it (its inside all of us) it doesn't exist and therefore something (in this case parecon) must be invented and imposed upon us.

**Planning and Coordination:** One of the biggest things the free society will produce and one of the biggest 'loads' on the system would be information. Information in the mass would flow to those places where people are making decisions (personal and social) about work, supply, demand, distribution and so on. All tasks that needed doing or were being proposed would be advertised in some way: on noticeboards, newspapers and the internet, by posters saying 'help wanted' or at our local 'labor exchange.' We would apply for the job in the same way, meeting the workers doing it already and talking about skills required, hours to be worked and so on. If we got the job, then some local and central information bank is told that and the 'adverts' are cancelled. The same applies to goods. Now this will be a process of co-ordination, distribution, allocation and so on that is organized entirely horizontally, through rational processes and decisions. It will be a cybernetic system of 'interrogative' ("does anyone want to work here?") and 'response' ("we have surplus wheat") with a lot of co-ordination being done bilaterally but with information about decisions and allocations passed on to places recording and processing information and people managing this information.

At this point opponents say "Aha! Here is the making of a privileged and powerful bureaucracy. These places where information is processed are places of power and control." But as I have said, *most* decisions are taken locally and bilaterally, without anyone having the power to say yes or no to them. Most decisions about production and distribution in even our world get taken like this; it's just that government demands the right to vote, legalize and control those decisions. But we would also suggest that the problem could be overcome by us all agreeing that no one could work in this area for more than three years: one year as a candidate, one year as a co-ordinator, a final year as a mentor to new workers then out, permanently. And the co-operatives and syndicates managing co-ordination would be open for any to attend and that they have lay members chosen by lot from people volunteering and that all their decisions are publicly available for anyone to see or challenge. What then?

**The Problem of Allocation:** The main problems are inequitable allocation (of work and goods) and the dangers of bureaucracies misusing their power to allocate to control people. But as I said above, in a decentralized society of largely self-sufficient communities the amount of 'allocation' as opposed to self-managed sharing and distribution would be small and the danger slight. We would manage allocation, making ethical decisions about who gets what. If our wheat growing community receives two requests for grain, one from a community facing famine and the other from a community that needs fine flour to make cakes for its annual festival, what do we do? As long as we act ethically, (and without the fear of social stigma or the incentive of money, what else is there?), who would challenge us? But if we chose to send it to the festival and the local distributive federation diverted our grain to the famine-threatened region, we would have no recourse against them. The grain is not ours and we cannot impose our decisions on others; they are ethical beings too.

The difference between parecon and anarchist-communism is that our relations are not mediated by bureaucratic institutions (the IFBs), they are personal, immediate and direct - with each other. That is how things will be allocated, by millions of ethical decisions made everyday by billions of people. The health of society would be measured by the extent that all of these ethical, self-managed and voluntary acts balance themselves and help meet the needs (spiritual and material) of humanity year in year out *without* decree, regulation or iteration. Anarchist-communism is a social revolution in which the true nature of humanity is re-discovered and expresses itself through individual and collective action. Anarchist-communism is not a system but the sum total of billions of individual acts occurring every day, acts stemming from the social-organic conscience of the billions of people who do them. It exists nowhere but in the minds of people and the co-operation between them.

**Waste and Disutility:** One of the most highly 'engineered' parts of society will be the flow and control of information, precisely to avoid problems from over- or under-allocation, waste, shortages and so on. In our society business builds waste and mismanagement into its cost structures and passes it on. This will not be true of the free society of tomorrow. Decentralized, self-sufficient communities will simply not generate waste. And intelligent information, intelligently used will control disutility.

But this notion of waste and disutility also needs to be challenged. I'm sure that when Tom talks of waste he is thinking of food rotting in warehouses because trains haven't been sent to pick it up. And when he speaks of disutility he is speaking both of factories only producing left shoes or too many poets and not enough coal-miners. And yes, this could happen. We think that in an ethical society built around notions of self-sufficiency, co-operation and equity such events would be occasional and manageable. In our society of profits and costs, food rots because it is cheaper to let it rot than to hire extra trains to transport it, pay overtime to people to load it or have unused barges in nearby harbors to carry it. But in the free society, people might stop doing some things in order to help with the loading, divert trains or re-commission them for service, have planned for emergencies and have spare barges near by. If society anticipates these problems, is responsive to need, is flexible, has spare capacity to meet the need and *learns* from the crisis so it doesn't happen next time, then it is a healthy, self-sustaining and stable society that will survive and grow.

Parecon does provide an alternative to hierarchical and exploitative relations within a capitalist society but it does not provide either the means to overthrow that society or the basis of universal freedom in the future. It is, sadly, like all the other reformist proposals of well-meaning thinkers of the last century. The only thing that has been added is that parecon is designed to manage the urge for instant gratification that capitalism has planted deep within all of us. Anarchist communism rejects this notion utterly. We do need forms of self-management and organization that challenge capitalism and the state, directly and indirectly. But if the parecon revolution did occur, we would quickly find ourselves back in the coils of capitalism through the means of money, property and law, which parecon does not propose to abolish.

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*Odessa Steps is an anarchist-communist from Liverpool, England, and a member of the Anarchist Federation.*

*Zende bād Hambastegie Karkaran  
Iran bā digar noghate Jahan!*

# Interview with an Iranian Anarchist

*There is a high probability that the current path of imperialist geo-politics in the Middle East will eventually lead the United States into open conflict with Iran. It is a known fact that the Bush administration has designated the country as belonging to the so-called 'Axis of Evil.' Lesser known are the reports that the U.S. military has been carrying out extensive reconnaissance missions to learn about nuclear, chemical, and missile sites in Iran in preparation for possible air-strikes in the near future. It is fair to say that the primary roadblock to open military aggression up to this point has been due to the "Vietnamization" of the Iraq occupation - the strength and effectiveness of the popular insurgency, coupled with the increasingly negative or critical view of the occupation among broad sections of the international community - which has left the United States without a free hand to fully extend its reach over the border into Iran. At least for the time being.*

*In light of this antagonistic relationship between the United States and Iran, and the potential military consequences on the horizon, basic internationalism compels us toward a better understanding of this country and those who struggle within its borders. Most anarchists in North America have little knowledge of the rich history of leftwing political struggle in Iran, just as we have an embarrassing lack of knowledge about this region of the world in general. So, with that in mind, we have taken the time to interview an Iranian anarchist friend of NEFAC. He obliged us by speaking on his experiences within Iran's revolutionary left, his political evolution towards anarchist-communism, and his socio-political analysis of where the country (and its progressive social movements) is today.*

*Payman Piedar is the editor of Nakhdar, a Farsi/English-language anarchist-communist magazine with a growing international readership, particularly among Iranian exile communities in North America and Europe. Although he remains very humble of his revolutionary activity over the past three decades, there is a lot to learn from his experiences. We are very proud to have the opportunity to publish some of them here.*

**NEA: Could you talk about how you first came to revolutionary politics? What influences directly led to your development?**

In 1969, when I was only thirteen, the Shah's regime announced that the bus fare was going to be risen from 2 to 5 Rials [at the time 700 Rials was equivalent to US\$1]. That an obvious blow to the

average family economy. So a demonstration was organized and I participated in it. Our school a huge contingent- quite spontaneously, I should add-marched down the "24 of Esfand" street, which was a major street then as well as now, breaking every bus's windows that passed by. Riot police chased us for two hours. It was amazing. Moreso because it was the first ever "direct action" that I had been involved in.

For the next two years my political participation was, individually, through writing progressive/political poetry on the black board at our school. The reader should know that Persian culture in general, and the political culture in particular, is very poetic. Since we have had thousands of years of authoritarian governments, the political resistance to the status quo, also, has always manifested itself through poetry-metaphorically speaking to the masses and educating them through verses that would be recited in the privacy of everyone's home or in social gatherings. As the saying goes: "Poetry runs through our blood."

**NEA: Leading up to the 1979 revolution, what was the left-political atmosphere in Iran like? Were you involved in any revolutionary groups who were active as these events unfolded?**

To answer this question properly, a quick review of the twenty-six years prior to the February Revolution of 1979 is in order. On August 18, 1953, when a CIA-organized coup overthrew the first ever Democratic (national bourgeois) government of Doctor Mosadegh in Iran, and brought the lackey Shah back to his throne, it was a huge blow to both the social movements and the revolutionary organizations. However, four years after the return of the Shah to power, on December 7, 1957, when the then U.S. Vice president, Richard Nixon visited Tehran, he was met with a militant student demonstration which threw tomatoes at his motorcade. On that dark day three students were murdered by police. They became martyrs and, consequently, the student movement was born.

Nevertheless, over the next fourteen years the shadow of an imperialist dictatorship through the fascist regime of the Shah was to be predominant. The traitorous leaders of the Tudeh Party (so-called Communist Party, lackeys of our Soviet neighbors to the north) had long left the political scene into exile in East Germany. The remnants of the National Front (bourgeois party of Doctor Mosadegh) were in total disarray. In short there was no room left



for any open political activities or organizations, let alone revolutionary ones. Every sign of discontent would be crushed in its inception, and the only spaces left fairly intact were the Mosques and religious schools. However, during that period the most intellectually advanced of the student movement began a meticulous study of the socio-economic conditions of the country all the way to the post coup d'état period-i.e. the transformation of Iranian society from a "semi-feudal/semi-colonial" state to a "peripheric" (dependent) capitalist society.

The 1963 "Kennedy-Rostow pact" had done its job: A land reform was imposed and the capitalist social relation was born. Of course, in order to save face, the puppet regime of the Shah pretended it was "his policy" and called it "The White Revolution". To sum up: what the short lived national-bourgeois government of Mosadegh did not get (or better said, was not given) the chance to do was done by the hegemonic imperialist power of the United States.

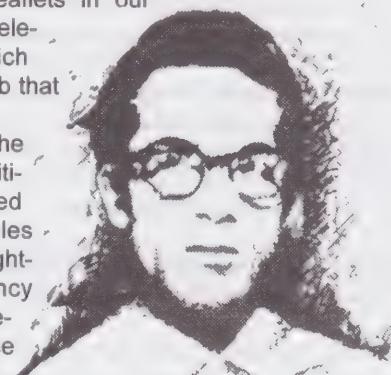
The above socio-economic analysis and consequent political ramification is summarized in a book called: *Mobarezeye Mosalahane ham Strategy ham Tactic* ["Armed Struggle: As Both a Strategy and Tactic"] by comrade Masoud Ahmadzadeh. Alongside comrade Amir Parviz Poyan's brilliant book *Mobarezeye Mosalahane va Rade Theory Bagha* ["Armed Struggle and the Refutation of the Theory of Survival"] they became the theoretical cornerstone of the revolutionary organization called: "Organization of The Iranian People's Fedai Guerrilla" (OIPFG). The first public manifestation of this revolutionary organization was on the dawn of "19 Bahman 1349" (February 9, 1971), when a group of thirteen guerrillas attacked the "Siahkal" security forces in the northern region. This announced the birth of the armed struggle.

For the next three years, while finishing high school, I became a staunch supporter of OIPFG. I would distribute -- clandestinely of course -- their leaflets in our school, leaving copies on telephone booths, in sandwich stores, and in a billiards club that I frequented with friends.

Seven months after the arrival of OIPFG on the political stage, another armed group called "Peoples Mojahedin of Iran" with a slightly radical-Islamic tendency (parallel to the "liberation theology" of Latin America) came into existence. However, in subsequent years up until, and after, the February Revolution of 1979 they would go through transformations, which I will not get into here. I left Iran for England in August 1974, and a year later to the United States, to attend university. But I kept my strong allegiance to the armed struggle in Iran for the next eleven years to come.

**NEA: Before Khomeini was able to lead the fundamentalist backlash and counter-revolution, what radical gains were made by the Iranian people through the February 1979 events?**

Well, unfortunately a majority of the Iranian people got fooled into supporting the so-called referendum that the Khomeini regime had proposed (for the establishment of the Islamic Republic). That was the death sentence for the organized left.



Amir Parviz Pouyan, revolutionary author and Iranian urban guerrilla

Nevertheless, before the reorganization of the counter-revolution and its total control over all areas of civil society, every sector of the Iranian society was so thirsty for the so-called new founded "freedom" that they won through their own self-organization. Workers started the Shoura ("soviet" or "council") movement in many factories and even the peasants of the ethnic Turkaman minority (in the Northern region) organized themselves in the same fashion. Women held a major demonstration demanding the right to refuse wearing the religious attire (forceful covering of their body). Students held lively debates and started organizing themselves into various leftwing groupings. The Kurds (the largest and most radical ethnic minority) immediately created their autonomous zone of control (either through the bourgeois Democratic Party of Kurdistan, or The Komole, a leftwing petite-bourgeois organization with a strong pro-worker/peasant tendency), with their Armed Pishmarg (namely "self-sacrificing guerrilla") ready to shed their blood to defend their territory.

But, again, unfortunately none of the above mass organizations lasted more than a few months. The counter-revolution established their various reactionary armed organizations, namely the Pasdaran Enghelab (so-called "Guardian of the Revolution"), Basij (an armed youth formation), and worst of all The Hezbollah Party (you could call them the fascist brigade, or "Falange"), and immediately started to smash, break up, and in the case of the Turkamans, carry out vicious executions. In Kurdistan a massive bombardment of their camps took away all the progressive gains that the masses had made for themselves. And, of course, the regime started to create its own "Islamic Shouras", "Islamic women associations" and "Islamic student associations" (which was the extension of the previous pro-Khomeini student organization that was already active prior to his return to Iran). However, what it could never accomplish was to come up with any sham organization which could claim having the interest of any ethnic minority in heart.

**NEA: What became of the radical left in Iran following this counter-revolution? Was there an active exile movement abroad? What was your political activity of this period?**

In order to answer this question properly, I should say that all the intense class struggle (moreover, the massive anti-Shah front) convinced the imperialists that the Shah's time was over. They finally came around and accepted Khomeini's compromise (and promise) of going to reside in the city of Ghom and not intervene in political matters in Tehran. However that was all a bluff in Khomeini's part. We could say that he was very astute and cheated everyone. That is, he cheated all the discontented Iranian masses on one hand, and all the imperialist powers on the other. He not only shoved his plan of the Islamic Republic down our throats, but also antagonized more than ever the whole Middle East region. Khomeini's rhetoric of extending his reign into Iraq (since the majority of the Iraqis are Shia Muslim and Saddam's Baathist regime was Sunni) gave the United States imperialists the excuse to give the green light for Saddam to invade Iran with the hope of getting rid of his regime for one that was more in line with their immediate interests. We should not forget that Khomeini's regime (in Bani Sadre's presidency) constantly bombarded the Kurdish rebellious region, which is the frontier with Iraq, and had already killed many Iraqis.

So the situation was tense at any rate. When the war between Iran and Iraq broke out in late 1980, it gave Khomeini the best

weapon to finish the dismantling of all the remaining peoples' movements, and consequently all the leftist organizations in the country. At this point anyone who had the means to escape abroad did so. As a result, a huge anti-Islamic Republic movement flourished in exile. Mojahedin's leadership helped Bani Sadr (The first Iranian president under Khomeini) to escape with them to Paris. They immediately created the first bourgeois opposition to the Islamic Republic called the "National Resistance Council" (NRC).

At this time I had just finished my Masters in the United States and decided to move to Paris for intense political activity. The organization that I was sympathetic to was a small group which had branched out of the OIPFG right after the February 1979 revolution (following the theoretical line of comrade Ahmad Zadeh) known as "Ashraf Dehghani Group". However we officially used the same name (OIPFG) and emblem. The next two and a half years (1981 to late 1983) was the most memorable time ever for me personally in terms of political organizing and agitation. We were the first, among the eight groups, to initiate an all-out radical offensive against the pro-Khomeini Islamic Falange (which had ties to the Iranian Embassy), who would try to kick us out of the Cite Universite where we would hold our weekly gatherings. They even had the tacit support of the CRS (special French police battalion). We were also the first who brought the issue of the NRC being in the pockets of the imperialists to light, trying to isolate them from the real anti-Islamic Republic and anti-imperialist movement.

**NEA: At some point you evolved from a Marxist-Leninist position to anarchist-communism. Could you explain what led to a reassessment of your politics? How did you first come into contact with anarchism? Is there much of a conscious history of anarchism within the Iranian left?**

The OIPFG was really an eclectic organization. It claimed to be Marxist (it's socio-economic analysis of the Iranian society in my opinion was, and still is, quite valid) and Leninist, because it believed in the hierarchical organization of the vanguard: the Communist Party (embodying all the other arrogance of Lenin, such as believing that the workers are incapable of developing beyond an economist understanding of the struggle so it needs revolutionary vanguard-a strata outside of the work process to lead the proletariat to revolution). It also included bits of Maoism (the need to create a People's Army) and foco theory, or Guevarism (because we did not have to have a vanguard party at first, as a guerrilla group we could act as a small engine which would in the process give inspiration to the bigger engine, or mass movement, to come along and lead the revolution).

Of course all these different elements were interpreted in the concrete historical situation of Iranian society, and it made sense to me for a long while (1971-1985). For the next few years



New Fadaiyan Khalq recruits learn to use a heavy machine gun.

I lived in South America. At this time I still, with nostalgia, held onto the "glorious path of the fallen comrades" and defended the theoretical contributions that they had made during all those years. Rejecting all the opportunist factions that had done damage to the organization, I felt that something was wrong. Since I remained committed to my core communist ideals it occurred to me that it was the organizational type that I increasingly found objectionable. The defeat of the revolution in general (specifically, its democratic aspiration), and the destruction of the Iranian Left (movement of socialist ideals) in particular was very hard to digest.

So in search of answers I re-read a lot of Marx's key texts, and added to the list of my readings the various schools of thought that I had no knowledge up to that point: council communism, autonomist-Marxism, Frankfurt School, and the Situationist International. I also immersed myself into reading many feminist writers, and to boost my spirit I went back to reading novels -- mostly works by South American and European writers.

In 1989 I had made up my mind to go back to school. This way I would get back into the habit of reading more systematically. This time I chose anthropology, and moved to New York City. It was in 1990 that I had my first real encounter with anarchist politics. I joined an anarchist study group, and it did not take long to discover when and how the working class took the wrong turn in its historical struggle for the liberation of humanity. Over the next few years I focused my reading on the works of the major anarchist-communist theorists.

My answer to the last part of this question (whether or not there has ever been a conscious anarchist history in Iran) is a resounding no. There is not much of a conscious history of anarchism within the Iranian left. Worse still, most of the radical Left in exile has since moved to the right, having since become social democrats.

However, inside Iran I have met some free spirited young anarchists. By introducing *Nakhdar* to this milieu my hope is that we could make a small impact and the next generation will not make the mistakes of the previous ones.

**NEA: Do you feel that there is important insight for anarchists to draw from traditional Marxism?**

Yes, definitely. I believe that the anarchist thinkers have unfortunately not contributed as much as Marx (and some of the Marxists after him) in the realm of economic theory. For example, Kropotkin has written comparatively little in that respect. Marx still is an important reference for all anti-capitalists. Do not forget that Bakunin was very much influenced by *Das Capital*. For me Marx remains one of the greatest revolutionaries of all time. I would add that there is a consistency in all of his writings. I would not diminish his 'early' writings or separate them from his 'later' work. Of course, I disagree with his political stand against Bakunin in the First International, and all that came after it, but it does not diminish his accomplishments.

I should also add that in my opinion we should separate Marx and Marxism (at least what I understand of it) from Lenin and Leninism. Still, we could learn quite a bit from other Marxist thinkers from the above mentioned school of thoughts. However in the organizational realm we have to rely 100% on anarchist thinking and practice. At least that is where I draw my take on anarchism.

**NEA: What is the current political climate in Iran? Do you see potential within any social struggles for anarchism or libertarian communist politics to gain influence?**

The current political climate in Iran is terrible. In general there is apathy all over the political spectrum. The reason is that Khatami's presidency (as we had predicted in Nakhdar) was a sham and did not bring any meaningful change. The false hope was that he could 'stand up' to the so-called 'conservative' faction and could bring liberalization of the political atmosphere on the one hand and create more jobs for the youth (who currently represent 65% of the workforce) on the other. He did not accomplish either. Newspapers have been shut down; workers' claims on months of back pay have been ignored, and their daily demonstrations in front of their respected factories are being attacked. Wage increases for teachers and nurses have been postponed, the number of political prisoners and the torture of students (or any other dissident intellectuals) who dare to raise their voice is on the rise again. Finally, the desperation of the unemployed youth has caused an increase in the drug addiction (currently over two million!) and prostitution in particular. The corruption is skyrocketing, and the decadent lifestyle of a small class (the 'Nuevo Rich') is sickening. And it is becoming increasingly worse, with no progressive alternatives in sight. Consequently the average Iranian is in total despair.

However there has been an attempt, in the last month or so, by a few radical students and some ex-liberals. They published an open letter on the internet asking for the international community to intervene by pressuring the Islamic Republic to hold a referendum for the constitutive assembly. They believe that if they could raise one million signatures-from all Iranians, both inside and outside of Iran-their plan can have a chance to succeed.

I personally do not believe in such a plan. My answer to the last part of your question is -- again unfortunately -- no. The current apathy in general, and the disastrous situation of the working class movements in particular (not to mention the almost non-existence of any radical political organizations), makes me have no such hope. But I am not pessimistic either. I truly believe the liberation of the working class is in its own hands. The situation is very explosive and any moment the masses could rise up spontaneously. And that is where the real alternative would have to be shaped. Nevertheless we have to be realistic.

In Iran we have been living in a political culture that has been nourished in a very authoritarian fashion for thousands of years. The tolerance even within the left has not been huge. It has to be learned. And that takes time. We should know by now that real social change (in a truly radical sense) does not happen over night. It takes generations to be shaped. Even in the West, where there has been this historical precedence for over a century now, we do not see such occurrences either.

**NEA: What are the fundamental differences between the organization of Capital under the Imperial regime and under the Islamic Republic? How has the form of struggle changed?**

First of all I should remind the reader that the Shah's regime was a puppet one (from 1941-53 to British imperialism, and right after the coup of 1953 through 1979 to U.S. imperialism). After the coup the oil consortium was divided 51% for the United States and 49% for the British imperialist power. There was a permanent military presence by the United States (10-20,000 troops) in Iran.

By 1972, under the Nixon (Kissinger) doctrine, the Shah's regime became the gendarme of the Persian Gulf. That is to say after the Vietnam fiasco the U.S. world strategy had changed for the regionalization of conflict (Low Intensity Conflict). Therefore the role of 'watch dog' was given to the Shah. At one point the Shah sent the Iranian military to crush an uprising by the Marxist guerrillas in Oman. For that purpose the creation of OPEC became an economic and political necessity. The price of oil would go up (a defeat for the Europeans, and a gain for the U.S.) but at the same time the Shah would buy billions of U.S armaments in exchange. The dumping of other U.S. products [into the Iranian market] was also widespread.

In short, for twenty-four years the economic, political, military, as well as cultural imperialism of the United States was predominant in Iran. The European Imperialists were present, but only on a minor level. However, the coming of the Islamic Republic was through a real revolutionary upheaval; no matter how much it's now hated by the majority of the population.

While the Shah's regime was hated from the very beginning, it took a while (especially in light of eight years of war with Iraq, and the use of the national-chauvinist rhetoric against the Arabs) for the people to realize that the Islamic regime has been the greatest impediment for progressive social change. In Iran at the moment 89% of the population are in the opposition. The survival of the remaining 11% is completely dependent on the regime. In other words, they are in one way or another receiving their salary from the regime.



Women protesters at Ferdowsi Square, Tehran, March 1979

The European imperialists are now the predominant presence in Tehran. And that of course happened since the taking over of the U.S. embassy by the Islamic students, which resulted in the breaking off of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Iran. Most of the European capital investment is either in the oil/petrochemical or mining industries,

but also in the auto industry, electronics, etc. However, because of the infamous "axis of evil" role that the Iranian regime has been playing in the region (supporting fundamentalist Islamic movements, particularly in Lebanon, and now Iraq) it has forced them to move toward semi-self sufficiency in the making of the light military armaments. The country's connection with the Pakistani nuclear program, as well as other ambitious plans has made a headache for the hegemonic reach of U.S. imperialism in the most volatile region of the world. The Islamic Republic had been taking advantage of the internal rivalry between the imperialist powers up until now. They have good relations with Cuba, which is helping them in the medical field in exchange for oil. They also have invited Chinese capital and expertise in the development of the transportation infrastructure.

So as you can see there is quite a difference between the role of the capital in the two periods. Nevertheless, 85% of the economy is still in the hands of the State. Private investment is small (only some in commerce, and the importation of goods in the light industry and service sectors).

On the last part of the question I should say that because of the change in the historical period (i.e. non-existence of mass movements during the Shah's time to the rise of the consciousness and the involvement of millions of people in all areas of socio-political activity), there has definitely been a change in the political, as well as social and cultural, struggle. The participation of the masses, especially women and youth, has been enormous.

**NEA: Over the last few years we have seen an incredible resurgence of the Iranian student movement. The student movement has always played an important role in Iranian revolutionary history. What are your thoughts on the movement and its role in the Iranian struggle?**

Well yes, since its inception the student movement has been quite active. As I have already said, most of the revolutionary cadres from the 1950s through the 1970s had risen from this very movement. However after the war with Iraq the Islamic regime tried to silence the role of the student movement with a so called "Cultural Revolution" (i.e. closing the universities for 2-3 years in order to clean up the student assemblies from the radical elements, and by admitting the youth from the families of the "martyrs" of the war without the entrance exam, thereby "Islamizing" the very core of the defeated movement).

It worked for a short while, but through a drop in the quality of the curriculums, and, consequently, the lowering standard of the graduate body, the dialectical reemergence of discontent caused the student movement to again gain momentum. After Khatami came to power in the late '90s, the student movement started to rejuvenate itself. However, liberalism has taken over the radical ideas of the previous decades. Nevertheless, because Khatami has not fulfilled his promises the very same liberal body of student associations is becoming the Achilles heel of the regime. Here we have to recognize that because of its mostly middle class origin the student organizations are never a homogenous movement. A big chunk will always either be for the status quo, or else have a very reformist (academic) agenda at most.

But in the final analysis the small yet very active radical elements have come to bear the theoretical as well as agitational/mobilizational revolutionary role. And here is where we can find the next generation of the "organic intellectual" that any revolutionary movements need. For that matter, in his last lecture



University students protesting in the streets of Tehran for democratic reforms, July 1999.

at the Tehran University student meeting for the occasion of the "16 of Azar" [December 8th] day of the student movement, Khatami, whose second term in office is coming to an end, was booed, and the students shouted "Khatami: shame on you!" and "You are a traitor!". We should hope that in this round of deep socio-economic crisis and illegitimacy of the whole political establishment the student movement plays its historic role once again.

**NEA: And the current situation within the Iranian women's movement?**

There is quite a big gap between the student and the women's movement in Iran. Gender equality, and subsequently women's issues, as we all know, is a relatively new phenomena on a world scale, and especially in the so-called "third world" countries. However, Khomeini's Islamic regime has dealt a huge setback for certain social issues (i.e. the loss of abortion rights; the inequality of laws of divorce and child custody; forced Islamic attire). But also in this area, after the war (and because of it) the lack of a qualified workforce ended up to be in the favor of women. They forcefully gained quite a lot of space in civil society. They have waged courageous battles and have won quite a bit. They are now over 60% of university student enrollment. In all areas (science, humanity, art, etc.) their participation is increasing year by year.

Under the fascist regime of the Islamic Republic, Shirin Ebadi, the first Iranian woman lawyer and human rights activist became the first "Muslim woman" to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Her winning of this award, even though politically motivated, put the struggle of the Iranian women (as well as other democratic rights) in the international spot light. It also has pressured the Islamic regime, and will inevitably help the cause of women's struggles for future generations to come.

I am quite optimistic that the Iranian women (like any other country) will play a large part (if not the core) of any movement for radical social change. After all, aren't they (well, not all of them) the ones who give birth to the future revolutionary generations? And aren't they, alongside the anti-patriarchal male activist, who will permanently (re)educate the cause for gender equality? Of course, in addition to the women's movement, we should not forget to mention the gay and lesbian movement -- which is quite in its infancy in the Iranian society.

**NEA: Most of the official labor organizations in Iran are State organs. Recently we have witnessed certain sectors of the Iranian proletariat bypass these mediators in favor of acting autonomously. Does this represent a further radicalization of the Iranian working class?**

Not necessarily so. As far as I know, on the surface it looks like more radicalization of a certain sector of the proletariat. We can observe daily manifestations of their discontent on a national level: strikes, sit-ins, work stoppages, etc. But so long as the workers do not have the freedom to form their own organizations independent of the State, and subsequently, so long as the "yellow syndicates" [pro-capitalist unions] are predominant, we cannot talk of a successful "bypassing" of these mediators as such.

However, in the current fascistic atmosphere, it is definitely a progressive move forward that cannot be ignored. I hope that more workers join in, especially in the oil sector, so the pressure against the State machinery would facilitate the opening of a space for the advancement of the struggle of the whole society. That is still to be seen.

**NEA: Apart from the anti-imperialist language of the Islamic Republic, there continues to be heavy investment in Iran by foreign powers, most significantly the European Union. Could you speak a bit on imperialism's role in the oppression and exploitation of the Iranian people?**

You're right. As I mentioned above there has been an increase in the European investment capital in Iran. The Iranian State has made sure that labor laws continue to be in favor of the imperialist investors (i.e. against the workers in general, in the oil, petro-chemical, and mining sectors in particular). Long hours of work and no attention paid to any of the workers' grievances whatsoever of course benefits the continuing cycle of foreign capital. On the other hand the militarization of civil society is another indirect favor to the domination of the imperialist powers.

**NEA: The Bush administration has been paying lip-service to the resistance inside Iran, particularly the student movement. This serves as a dilemma for some of us outside Iran. We want to support the Iranian people's struggle against authoritarianism and capitalism, but we don't want to support imperialism's agenda, particularly when we know it will never let developments take a proletarian course. On the other hand, we want to support the fight against imperialism, but don't want to make the mistake of the many on the Left in the past of supporting lesser authoritarian capitalist states against greater ones. Could you speak a bit about this and what position you feel we here can take to show solidarity without supporting the Islamic republic or playing into imperialism's hand?**

Exactly. You do not want to fall into the trap of imperialist rhetoric. We know for a fact that the imperialists and local bourgeoisie never want liberty and freedom for the oppressed masses, nevermind any sort of radical proletarian agenda.

Specifically in the case of Iran, the clear example was during Doctor Mosadegh's "national bourgeois" government, when there was freedom for political activity. Nevertheless the U.S. (in alliance with the British) preferred an inexperienced monarch who could be manipulated, and later be an excellent puppet like the Shah. So they did away with democracy, and re-installed a fascist dictatorship. That has been the imperialist policy all over the world for over half a century.

Of course times have changed and the imperialists don't mind having regimes that play the game of elections every four years. That way people can be fooled and capital can become the only cultural "value". And that's where Bush's phony support comes from. But Iran (and most of the Middle East, for now) is not the place to play that game. Because it is a highly important geo-political region (having 70% of the world's oil reserves), the U.S hegemonic power does not want regimes that are not 100% in tune with their political and economic agenda. No wonder the Saudi's primitive monarchism is their favorite regime -- subservient, and loyal to the end.

So there is no dilemma for leftists in the west to support all democratic aspirations by the masses in Iran. Anarchist-communists (and the Left in general) must stand with the Iranian people. But be sure that you are not supporting any imperialist agenda, and that you are firmly behind a radical proletarian agenda. That is enough to scare not only the imperialists, but also their capitalist/authoritarian allies (including the liberals) in Iran to their bones!

**NEA: Maybe we should end with a question about the Nakhdar project. Could you talk about magazine, and how it**

**first started? Also, how successful have you been in reaching other Iranians (both inside Iran, and abroad) with anarchist ideas? Is there any way the broader anarchist community could assist you in your efforts?**

In the early 1990s, I joined a few Iranian comrades who were publishing a libertarian-Marxist journal called *Ghiam* ["Insurrection"] in Farsi. It was a collaborative project between a handful of comrades from various tendencies within the Marxist tradition from both Europe and the United States. My collaboration lasted two years since the journal ceased publication. It died because each member was in personal, as well as ideological, crisis. In my case it was the beginning of the end of my Leninist tendencies.

A few years ago I got in touch with some of these old comrades (who were by then in different parts of the world) to initiate a new era of ideological and political activities. I had already started the translation of a few basic anarchist theoretical texts. Subsequently I planted the idea of *Nakhdar* ["Neither God, Nor state, Nor bosses"] as an independent anarcho-communist publication for the "exiled" community of radical Iranian activists.

At first, like any new project, the magazine was received with jubilation. A few comrades promised their contributions but were waiting for the pilot issue. It was to be a theoretical as well as agitational publication that could be published twice a year. However with the lack of commitment from most of these comrades it has ended up being a yearly. Nevertheless the publication of *Nakhdar* has been received positively. Mostly from outside of Iran, however there has been some contact from inside Iran as well. Because of the lack of funding *Nakhdar* now is being sent to only fifteen different Iranian publications in the United States and Europe, as well as roughly fifty individuals internationally. It is also being smuggled into Iran and has a growing readership there.

It's early to say much about the short term success of anarchist ideas within the Iranian Left. We are behind, for example, Turkey in our region of the world. Even though by talking to various comrades and friends on the both side of the world I'm assured of the growth of the anarchism in the long term. The young population of Iran [65% of the population is currently between 18-25], who are politically much more independent thinkers than before, is one of the elements of the future success of this ideology. Of course the dead-end politics of traditional Left (authoritarian/hierarchical) is the main reason to be quite hopeful. As far as the help of the broader anarchist community, I could say either send money (no matter how little) or independently redistribute (photocopy) *Nakhdar* as widely as you can within the Iranian community in your area. There are Iranian-American youth who are thirsty for anarchist ideas. The road ahead is a long one but the first step has been taken.

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*This interview was done by MaRK, Arya, and Robin.  
All three are members or supporters of NEFAC-Boston.*

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***Nakhdar* can be contacted at PO Box 380473, Cambridge, MA 02238-0473. If you would like a copy of the magazine, please include \$6ppd (checks or money orders, please leave "pay to the order of" section blank).**

# The Voltairine de Cleyre Reader

edited by A.J. Brigati (AK Press, 2004); 251 pp. \$16.95

Voltairine de Cleyre was a US-born anarchist and feminist writer, agitator, and freethinker. Her political life began soon after the Haymarket affair and ended soon before WWI. Until now, she has been treated as a footnote to the canon of Major Anarchist Thinkers, but there seems to be an effort underway to put her on that short list. The recent renewed interest in the intersection between anarchism and feminism, as well as the push to untangle North American anarchist history from the anarchist workers' movements in Europe, have made de Cleyre something of a hot topic.

Which means that although no de Cleyre books have come out since Paul Avrich's 1978 biography, we are suddenly hit with three books: in September 2004, Eugenia DeLamotte's "Gates of Freedom: Voltairine de Cleyre and the Revolution of the Mind"; in November, this volume, edited by "A.J. Brigati"; and in January of this year, Sharon Presley and Crispin Sartwell's "Exquisite Rebel: The Essays of Voltairine de Cleyre, Anarchist, Feminist, Genius." Of the three, Brigati's is the shortest, the least padded by secondary material, the only one put out by an anarchist press, and the cheapest. For those curious to see what all the hype is about, this one seems like a logical first step.

Unfortunately, the volume is chronologically and thematically jumbled, and it only includes two essays on "the Woman question," as it was then called: the excellent "Sex Slavery," a discussion of rape within marriage, women's control of their bodies, and poverty; and "Those Who Marry Do Ill," which is about how monogamy allegedly impedes individual "self-expression". If you're seriously interested in learning about how de Cleyre approached feminism as an anarchist woman of her time, you may want to look instead at "Gates of Freedom", which gives 140 pages to the topic.

Reading through the rest of her essays, one is struck with how easily de Cleyre would fit in today's North American anarchist "scene". It was de Cleyre who first expanded the term "anarchism without adjectives" (initially a call for unity between collectivists and communists in Spain) to include individualism. To understand why individualism ran so deeply through her views on gender, labor, education, and political autonomy, it's important to consider her life and how she came into the anarchist movement.

de Cleyre was born in a working-class, frontier family in Michigan. They weren't religious, in fact, her father was a communist, but for economic reasons, she was sent to a Catholic convent in Ontario to receive her education. Therefore she came of age intellectually in her rebellion against a morally repressive, anti-scientific, feudal institution. A radical version of bourgeois individualism was well-suited her personal struggle. When she left the convent, moved to Philadelphia, and learned about the struggles of the largely immigrant working class against capitalism, she synthesized their socialist and anarchist ideas with her individualism. She also entered a close relationship with Dyer D. Lum, an individualist militant in the Knights of Labor, and the editor of the radical newspaper *The Alarm*.

The political work de Cleyre took up was mostly writing and lecturing, and she also began teaching English to Jewish immigrants.

It makes sense that these were her primary political activities, because in addition to being an individualist (and despite her insistence that "direct action" was preferable to "political action") she was also a staunch philosophical idealist. De Cleyre continually pointed out how the ideas and ideals of bourgeois modernity still served as a progressive force alongside the direct action of the class struggle, because social hierarchy was being maintained and reproduced by feudal institutions alongside capitalist ones.

Her 1911 essay "Francisco Ferrer" is the best example of this. Ferrer was an anarchist teacher who had been executed by the Spanish state two years earlier as an insurrectionary leader; de Cleyre explained that while all Ferrer had really done was open an independent school that taught modern science, that alone was a revolutionary threat to Spain's heavily superstitious Catholic social order. While problematic, this argument is interesting to consider in our own era, when the politically dominant section of Capital is again turning to religious institutions to help them maintain social order in our country.

De Cleyre's focus on the power of ideas and the agency of individuals helped her avoid the vulgar historical

materialism and fetishization of "the mass" that would lead Marxist projects down the road to surprise defeats by nationalism (WWI), party worship (the Russian revolution), and ultimately fascist movements within the working class. But her sympathies toward bourgeois ideals led her into a different trap. Her belief in "Will," or "the gossamer web of being that floats and swims far over our heads in the free world of air," prevented her from understanding the working class in terms of the work we are forced to do, and figuring out our potentials for action from there.

Instead, "the workers", and that overlapping group, "the women", were simply excluded subjects that needed to be included in the project of Equality. She never questioned the premise of that project, but merely argued that the time had come for its boundaries to be expanded, or rather, updated in answer to "the economic question". Thus, she spoke of the American Revolution in glowing terms, as a simple rebellion of freethinkers against tyrants, without any mention of the genocidal expropriation of the continent from its native inhabitants, or of the African slave trade and slave labor that fueled its economy. The defeat of Reconstruction, as well as continued colonization of the West, are not even mentioned in this collection, though her essays are teeming with references to other current events.

These blatant omissions limited de Cleyre to an essentially Eurocentric understanding of the significance of America. Since for her the interplay of ideas was the moving force in history, and the ideas she started out from were a specifically European set of ideas rooted in European history (the struggle against the ideolog-



ical domination of the Church and the States that supported it), she could only understand the social struggle in America as an extension of European history. For her the labor struggle was important, but only as the latest instance of this unfolding drama. Also, she could not see that the flipside of individualism, the European ideology of the "new world" or frontier as the site of autonomy, was for the rest of the world simply settlerism and primitive accumulation.

Though she was undoubtedly ahead of her time, it makes more sense to group de Cleyre with the classical thinkers of the European "Enlightenment" than with many of the labor radicals she shared podiums with. Her feminism was Mary Wollstonecraft's feminism, applied to women now doubly enslaved by patriarchy and industrial capitalism. Her notion of political autonomy was Thomas Jefferson's, with the yeoman-farmer carefully replaced with the syndicalist worker. While she railed against the rich as a class, she approvingly quoted Jefferson's argument that "the merchants will manage the better the more they are left free to manage for themselves." (One of the editors of the "Exquisite Rebel" book, Sharon Presley, was confused enough to think that "anarchism without adjectives" includes something called "anarcho-capitalism.")

Of course, these complaints are only about her limits. Within those limits, she wrote some amazing essays, and if you are interested in old-school anarchist manifestos, "Direct Action," "Sex Slavery" and "Crime and Punishment" are three classics. The last is a focused attack on of the idea of punitive justice, all the more relevant in our age of mass incarceration in the US. And there were signs that, towards the end of her short life, de Cleyre was warming to a more international version of anti-capitalism. In her 1911 essay "The Mexican Revolt," she singles out "American landlord powers in Mexico" as a factor in the conflict, pledges solidarity to the revolutionaries, and condemns U.S. socialists for their lack of support. It would have been interesting to read her opinion of the revolution in Russia, but she died in 1912.

Reading Voltairine de Cleyre in 2005 is an ambivalent task. In the century since she wrote these essays, capital has proven

adept at containing workers' struggles and subsuming all of social life to its logic. Reading a set of "anarchist" essays that don't really offer much strategic advice about fighting capitalism seems a bit indulgent. One gets the sense that, were she alive today, de Cleyre would go about condemning working class people for being religious and "consumerist" (...nine hundred and ninety nine men out of a thousand are more interested in drinking a glass of beer than in questioning the tax that is laid on it...); scrutinizing hierarchical power relations between individuals without looking at how society as a whole is reproduced as a hierarchy in the process of capitalist production; and writing bad poetry. (And yes, the book includes forty-six pages of it.)

At her best, de Cleyre had incisive points to make about patriarchy, the state, and religious institutions, and how they relate to one another. Her writings on the radicalizing potential of education are relevant, because if we are proposing that revolutionaries take up a "leadership of ideas" we have to examine the process of disseminating those ideas. Beyond that, her writing style is fiery, and just old-fashioned enough to use for intimidating slogans. One can even learn from the parts where she was not at her best, thanks to Brigati's meticulously researched footnotes explaining de Cleyre's references to her unjustly martyred freethinker predecessors, her unjustly imprisoned anarchist contemporaries, historical events, and news of the struggles of her era.

There is nothing especially outrageous or counter-revolutionary about these essays, and those who make a hobby out of browsing the "radical canon" could pass many an afternoon with this collection. But class-struggle feminists and anarchists, seeking inspiration and insight from the past to apply to the monumental obstacles we face today, should probably start elsewhere. This one can safely be saved for now, we'll need something to read in all that leisure time after the revolution.

-- reviewed by MJ (NEFAC-Boston)

## Without a Net: The Female Experience of Growing Up Working Class

edited by Michelle Tea (Seal Press, 2004); 256 pp. \$14.95

Inspired by the number of recent books seeking to examine the plight of the working class, editor Michelle Tea has compiled a collection of essays detailing the experience of working-class women. This is an inspiring detour from the usual books written on the topic, mostly written by someone from the middle class speaking to other middle class people about the unseen difficulties of being poor in America. Unlike exposés - such as Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* - which are largely sob stories detailing the injustice's and impossibilities of working class existence, *Without a Net* seeks to give voice to those who are frequently written about and included as statistics, but never heard from directly. Tea manages to do this without the undertone of self-pity and helplessness often associated with this genre. The essays cover a wide range of experiences, detailing everything from starvation to prostitution to selling blood for money.

Each story gives unique insight into how female identity is molded and changed by poverty. In the introduction Tea says, "One little book isn't going to create the drastic change in perception that

our society needs, but it's something. A united force of fierce truth-telling to entertain, educate and attempt to even the score".

It may not even the score, but books like this can serve to remind us that we are not alone in our experiences. This work helps to extinguish the feelings of isolation and loneliness that are so pervasive in working class communities. Growing up poor in America leaves one with stories like these. The ones included in this book could belong to any of us and that is this collection's greatest contribution: it could have been written by any of us. I highly recommend it as a quick, easy read with as much humor as political message.

Contributing authors include Dorothy Allison, Siobhan Brooks, Diane Di Prima, Terri Griffith, Daisy Hernandez, Shawna Kenney, Eileen Myles, Terry Ryan, Frances Varian, and others.

-- reviewed by Jody (NEFAC-Boston)



# FREE THE INDIGENOUS PRISONERS OF THE CIPO-RFM! LONG LIVE AUTONOMY!

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Since its birth, the CIPO-RFM has suffered terrible repression for taking a stand. Members have been attacked, jailed and even murdered by the government. The most recent attacks include the imprisonment of two members, who were arrested on September 14, 2004 at a demonstration against environmental destruction in the rural area of San Isidro Aloapám. Fourteen members of the CIPO-RFM were beaten and arrested for demanding justice. Four people remain in prison.

Since the arrests, the repression against those on the other side of the prison bars has intensified. There have been evictions, assassination attempts, and other crimes committed against them by the government that claims to represent them. On September 30, Raúl Gatica and Pedro Bautista, both members, travelled to Mexico City to testify before human rights groups. After the meetings, the men were followed by plainclothes agents, one of whom was later found to possess an assault rifle in a briefcase, along with federal credentials. On December 22, 128 state and federal riot cops violently evicted a peaceful vigil members were maintaining in the main square of Oaxaca City. The police also stole all of their belongings, from cooking supplies to money.

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